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CHAUCER'S LEGEND OF GOOD WOMEN.

(Continued from Vol. VII, No. 4.)

The second work upon which Cupid, in the Prologue to the *Legend*, has chosen to rest his indictment of Chaucer is the *Troilus and Criseyde*. Its use by the little god, as a basis for his charge of heresy, seems still less apposite than that of the *Rose*. Surely Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, a book given exclusively to the theme of love, is a curious work to have been written by one who cherishes bitterness toward Cupid. We have Lydgate's own testimony, on the contrary, that the book was a favorite with lovers:—

Whiche for to rede lovers them delyte  
They have therein so grete devocyon.

Furthermore, Cupid's original accusation is that Chaucer is guilty of heresy, not specifically against women, but against love. Now this work of the poet's is not less a story of the triumph than of the failure of love, not less a tale of the truth of Troilus' ("one of the patterns of love," as Shakespeare calls him) than of the falsehood of Cressid. Indeed, the fact that Cressid proves unfaithful is, as "Chaucer" himself indicates, little to the point:

Ne a trewe lover oghte me nat blame, (466)  
Thogh that I speke a fals lover som shame.

Yet, even so, he is putting his case weakly, for the author of the *Troilus*, so far from exhibiting any gratification at Cres-

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<sup>1</sup>The choice of the *Troilus*, as the basis of Cupid's charge, becomes especially ironical in the light of Alceste's command to Chaucer to write of women

That weren trewe in lovinge al hir lyves; (485)  
And telle of false men that hem betrayen.

If to make the faithfulness of woman shine out on the dark background of man's falsehood be a legitimate method of honoring love, why is not the reverse process just as lawful, and why, therefore, is not a tale in which the truth of Troilus is contrasted with the perfidy of Cressid a poem to the glory of love instead of a heresy against it? It is a poor rule that will not work both ways.

sid's "untrouthe," expresses sorrow for her faithlessness, and affirming that he writes as he does only because he finds it in his authority, cuts short the bitter story:

Ne me ne list this sely womman chyde  
 Ferther than the story wol devyse.  
 Hir name, alas! is publissed so wyde,  
 That for hir gilt it oughte y-now suffyse.  
 And if I mighte excuse hir any wyse,  
 For she so sory was for hir untrouthe,  
 Y-wis, I wolde excuse hir yet for routhe.<sup>1</sup>

In spite of the poet's attitude of detachment toward his story (no other of his works is more pervaded with irony, but the irony of the *Troilus* is always fundamentally tragic), and in spite of Cressid's great weakness of character, no candid reader can deny that Chaucer has a real affection for his heroine. In her—his most complex character, perhaps—he has wrought the miracle of making a thoroughly weak woman thoroughly attractive, and of arousing truly tragic emotion when she proves false.

It is pretty clear, then, that Cupid has chosen to rest his case on rather unconvincing evidence. One wonders, indeed, whether he has really read the works in question at all. Alceste, though in not quite such blunt terms, practically tells Cupid that he does not know what he is talking about. Somewhat in the fashion in which Cicero says *his omissis* and then gives an exhaustive list of the things he is leaving out, the Queen remarks:

And if ye nere a god, that knowen al, (348)  
 Than mighte hit be, as I yow tellen shal,

whereupon she proceeds, in a speech of nearly a hundred lines, to state in detail the ways in which the omniscient Cupid, had he not been omniscient, might have been deceived. But now, the question of Cupid's literary attainments aside, suppose that a reader of the A Prologue is himself unacquainted with the *Romance of the Rose* and the *Troilus*. He will be quite unable,

<sup>1</sup>V, st. 157. See also IV, st. 3.

on his own account, to pass upon the merits of Cupid's accusation. He is compelled, in other words, to go beyond the poem itself for its interpretation, to depend on his comprehension of an extrinsic reference for an individual opinion as to Chaucer's guilt—an arrangement constituting a palpable artistic blemish. In B, on the other hand, though the extrinsic reference remains, the blemish is effaced *by putting the ballad in Chaucer's mouth*. What the author has done might be illustrated in some such way as this: If we see a man arrested for cruelty to animals and hear from his accuser a number of lurid stories of his inhumanity, we shall probably be considerably affected, but, till the man has stated his side of the case, we shall, if we are wise, hold our final judgment in abeyance. If, on the other hand, only five minutes before he is arrested, we have ourselves beheld the prisoner (quite unaware that he is being watched) treating with the utmost kindness an old, broken-down horse, we shall certainly be inclined to think that the wrong man has been taken into custody and to accept with much more than the proverbial grain of salt the stories of his cruelty. It is quite thus in the case of Chaucer in the *Legend*. Things seen are mightier than things heard—especially when the latter are the windy charges of an ill-tempered little god. What confidence—whether he knows the *Troilus* or not—will the reader of Prologue B be inclined to place in the story of Chaucer's poetical transgressions, in the face of having seen him, only a moment or two before, in the very act of composing a ballad in praise of the Queen of Love? The number of improvements flowing from this one change in the B version is astonishing.

But leaving the question of the ballad,<sup>1</sup> let us return to a

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<sup>1</sup>The appearance of the names of two *men* in the ballad at once suggests that this is part of the satire, and, indeed, few aspects of the whole jest would be funnier than the intimation that there were not enough beautiful and virtuous women to fill up even a little ballad and that the poet, therefore, had to eke out with two masculine names. But this at once introduces a difficulty: if Chaucer has carried his satire, in this and other respects, into the ballad, he is thereby detracting from its value as a spontaneous expression of his own reverence for

passage the discussion of which (for reasons that will presently be obvious) has been deferred till now.

It has been declared by adherents of the priority of B that the passage about the birds (B 155-170) is but loosely woven into the texture of the poem and was accordingly cut out in the revision. But *is* the passage, I ask, merely a purple patch of fanciful description? I think it can be shown that it is highly organic, serving in fact a truly dramatic purpose. One of the most dramatic of devices, it will be readily admitted, is the repetition of the main theme in an under-theme; nothing is more helpful, indeed, in imparting to a work of art that high unity of which the drama stands especially in need. Now not more than four or five lines of this bird-mating passage need be quoted to render it clear that Chaucer has anticipated very charmingly the main situation of the Prologue in this description of the quarrels and reconciliation of the birds:

And tho that hadde doon unkindenesse— (153)  
As dooth the tydif, for new-fangelnesse—  
Besoghte mercy of hir trespassinge,  
*And humblyly songen hir repentinge,*  
And sworn on the blosmes to be trewe,

etc. Thus “humblyly” was Chaucer to sing his “repentinge” in the legends (“voide of al malyce”!); and just as Alceste is

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love. This is the one and only piece of adverse criticism which I have to offer—and I offer it merely tentatively and with the greatest hesitation—against the revised *Legend* as a whole. It is overwhelmingly likely that it is the present criticism rather than Chaucer’s art that is at fault, for it seems highly improbable that so self-restrained an artist as Chaucer would have let the desire for an additional “purple patch” of satire interfere with an important part of the satirical *organization* of his poem. Yet, for aught that I can now see, this is what, in this one instance, he has allowed himself to do. And the thing is perhaps explicable after all, and lends corroboration to the view that A is the earlier of the prologues. When the ladies sing the ballad, the presence of satire in it, unintended on their part, is ironically most effective and entirely in harmony with the rest of the A Prologue. Is it not possible that Chaucer, in transferring the ballad to himself, either overlooked, or, not overlooking, forgot actually to make, the necessary changes?

to intercede and break the stern "justice" of Cupid, so not Daunger but Pitee prevails among the birds and makes "Mercy passen Right." Is it stretching the meaning of the word to call all this "dramatic" foreshadowing?

In emphasizing, however, the organic function of this "bird-mating" passage I do not wish to overlook its intrinsic beauty. And this suggests an important matter. The long description<sup>1</sup> of which this picture of the birds is but a part is one of the most charming descriptions that Chaucer ever wrote—and it is wholly lacking in the A version! This is only one example—though, considering its length, doubtless the most striking—of the inferiority of A in the quality of pure delightfulness. This inferiority is frankly admitted by Dr. Lowes himself, his contention being that the structural and dramatic improvements in A more than offset the loss of charm.<sup>2</sup> Suppose one were to concede, for the sake of argument, the validity of all which Dr. Lowes says concerning the influence of the French *marguerite* poems and the organic superiority of A. Even then would one have come into the possession of any reason for Chaucer's deliberate omission of such a line as

Agayn the sonne, that roos as rede as rose, (112)

which might have been utilized so easily in A; or for the exclusion of that incomparable passage

Adoun ful softly I gan to sinke; (178)  
 And, leninge on myn elbowe and my syde,  
 The longe day I shoop me for to abyde  
 For nothing elles, and I shal nat lye,  
 But for to loke upon the dayesye,  
 That wel by reson men hit calle may  
 The 'dayesye' or elles the 'ye of day,'  
 The emperice and flour of floures alle.  
 I pray to god that faire mot she falle,  
 And alle that loven floures, for hir sake!—

lines which might have been introduced without a single change

<sup>1</sup>B 153—187.

<sup>2</sup>P. M. L. A., XIX, 683, n. 7.

into either the real or the dream May-scene of A? (Even the assumption that Chaucer was expunging allegory or removing references to Queen Anne cannot explain these excisions.) Above all, why should the poet have cut out from a description *which still appears in A* its very top and climax, that superlative couplet about the birds?—

Upon the braunches ful of blosmes softe,

In hir delyt, they turned hem ful ofte.

(Ah!—but the ever-convenient soulless scribe is the scape-goat suggested for this last atrocity.) As even these few illustrations show, Chaucer might have attained all the supposed structural advantages of A without sacrificing a number of the most charming passages in B. One may admit, in other words, all Dr. Lowes' premises and yet his argument remains logically ineffective, for, making these admissions, this is the situation: B is the more diffuse, albeit more charming, version; A is the more compact, albeit less charming, version; how tempting to assume a causal relation between these two judgments, and to argue, wherever a charming passage of B has disappeared, that it must have been eliminated *for the sake of* the structure of A! Just this assumption, unless I am myself mistaken, Dr. Lowes has made. And whatever he may or may not have shown concerning this or that group of lines, I think he has totally failed to prove that the most charming passages in B were sacrificed in the interest of the unity or dramatic quality of A. That I am not misrepresenting his article is shown by the fact that he entirely omits any detailed consideration of those passages which all must agree are the most delightful in the poem, choosing to center his attention on other passages where the quality of charm is not nearly so conspicuously present and where the difference between the two versions, in this particular respect, is relatively small.

But now if Chaucer, without any compensation for the sacrifice, has deliberately omitted from his revision some of the finest poetry he ever composed, he is guilty of a lack of conscious art in comparison with which Wordsworth's most stupid emenda-

tions were inspirations from the muse. Rather than to enter against Chaucer any such unpleasant accusation, it might be deemed preferable to give up the assumption that B is the earlier version. But let us suppose—for once more one may go to any extreme *argumenti causa*—that Chaucer was compelled to sacrifice the most charming passages in B in the interest of organic improvements. Is there, however, one straw of evidence for the belief that in revising his work he would not have produced new passages just as charming as the old? In other words—putting the *Legend of Good Women* aside for a moment—is there a straw of evidence that the increase of Chaucer's dramatic and architectonic power was attended by any corresponding loss? Are his earlier works more charming than his later ones? Dr. Lowes seems to think so. But when one remembers, for example, the description of the Carpenter's wife in the *Miller's Tale*, containing such couplets as

But of hir song, it was as loude and yerne (71)  
As any swalwe sittinge on a berne,

or

Hir mouth was swete as bragot or the meeth, (75)  
Or hord of apples leyd in hey or heeth,

one is at a loss to understand his opinion; and for my part I would give the whole *Parlement of Foules*, if it came to a choice simply on the basis of charm, sooner than lose that one paragraph from the *Miller's Tale*. Dr. Lowes' admission of the greater charm of B seems a very innocent matter, but in my judgment that single concession easily effaces in value all his arguments for the later date of A.

The thing is torned into was;  
That which was whilom grene gras,  
Is welked hey at time now.

Green grass to withered hay!—we have Dr. Lowes himself to thank for these lines from Gower which, relatively speaking, describe so excellently the metamorphosis of Chaucer's Prologue, if it be true that the A version followed the B.



The obverse side of Dr. Lowes' argument carries with it, if anything, even greater difficulties. He explains the dramatic and structural superiorities of A (whose date, he thinks, was 1394) as the result of Chaucer's mature art, an art gained in part by his work on the *Canterbury Tales*. "Suppose now," says Dr. Lowes, "that about 1394 Chaucer for some reason did come back to his earlier poem. What difference would his preoccupation meantime with the *Canterbury Tales*, so far as one may judge from their qualities, have made in his point of view? For one thing, he would certainly have a stronger prepossession in favor of compactness of structure, and that, as we have already seen, A shows. But with equal certainty, I think, we may assume that to the man who had conceived the vivid contrasts of the Wife of Bath and the Clerk of Oxford, of Harry Bailly and the Prioress, of the 'chanoun of religioun' and the London priest, the possibility of *dramatic contrasts* would be likely to make the first appeal;"<sup>1</sup> and this assumption concerning Chaucer's increasing dramatic and architectonic powers, even where no specific reference is made to the *Canterbury Tales*, is the hypothesis at the foundation of Dr. Lowes' whole theory. Now to the view that one of the prologues is much more dramatic than the other I have no objection whatever, that being, indeed, precisely my own conception. But when that conception carries with it the implication that Chaucer was in any sense deficient in dramatic and constructive powers at the time when he composed *either* of the prologues, it is time to enter strenuous objection, the objection being based in part on the further implication thereby involved in regard to the *Troilus*. Dr. Lowes places both prologues after the *Troilus*. Then he tells us that the improvements in A are due to Chaucer's late artistic advance along two specified lines. The plain logic of the situation, then, demands the belief that Chaucer was *relatively* lacking in dramatic and architectonic powers when he composed the *Troilus*. But can

<sup>1</sup> P. 787—second article.

such a conception be entertained for an instant?<sup>1</sup> Where has Chaucer surpassed—one is tempted to ask, where has he equalled—the perfection of construction of the *Troilus*; and for sheer dramatic genius what that he wrote later exceeds the level of numerous passages of that poem? He who remembers, for example, the visit of the “gossips” to console Cressid, will search the *Canterbury Tales* in vain, I think, for a scene of higher comic power, or for one which, with fewer changes, might be placed effectively on the stage of a twentieth century theatre. And as for “dramatic contrasts,” what one in the *Canterbury Tales* can quite equal that astonishing triple contrast involved in the three main characters of the *Troilus*, where each of the three (even Cressid against Pandarus) stands out in sharp relief on the background of the other two? No; it is not pre-eminently in dramatic and constructive powers, not even in humor, that the *Canterbury Tales* show an advance over the *Troilus*.<sup>2</sup> The advance, if there be any, is rather along the line of a specific kind of realism<sup>3</sup>—the realism which is the result of the writer's close contact with the life around him, the realism that makes the *Canterbury Prologue* a sort of epitome of fourteenth century England.

Before leaving this long discussion of the two Prologues and coming to the legends themselves, attention may be called to

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Lowes might answer that I am dealing with a man of straw, that he himself, in a later part of his article, insists on the maturity of the *Troilus*. I agree most heartily with that part of his paper, but my point is that every time he insists on the dramatic and structural merits of the *Troilus* he contradicts his contention that Chaucer acquired *at a later period* the powers exhibited in the revision of the Prologue of the *Legend*. Cf. p. 788 and p. 840, note 4!

<sup>2</sup> Though I have never happened to notice such a comparison, someone before this has undoubtedly suggested a likening of Chaucer's development to Shakespeare's. Chaucer in the *Troilus*, like Shakespeare in the tragedies of his “third” period, gives us in not a few respects his profoundest and most serious “criticism of life,” and the very length of that wonderful poem permits him to reveal aspects both of his art and his “philosophy” which we shall seek well-nigh in vain within the relatively narrow limits of any single *Canterbury Tale*.

<sup>3</sup> Realism of its own kind is the last thing, of course, that the *Troilus* lacks.

one of the weightiest pieces of evidence of the satirical nature of the poem: I mean its title—*The LEGEND of Good Women!* If the word “legend” had been used in Chaucer’s time in its modern sense, the title would at once, in itself, suggest that the whole thing was a joke. Is there no evidence that Chaucer might have used the word in its modern sense? The moment we consider two things—the character of the mediaeval legend and the character of Chaucer’s mind—we perceive that the word, because of its connotations, *must* have had for him, to all intents and purposes, exactly its modern meaning. Chaucer’s intellect was essentially skeptical; we need not go beyond the Nun’s Priest’s and Canon’s Yeoman’s tales to see that he has made abundantly clear his attitude toward all superstitions and popular “wonders.” The typical mediaeval legend was a tissue of such superstitions and wonders. “It abounds,” says Professor Lounsbury, “in marvels and miracles. But the marvels are usually puerile, and the miracles are, if anything, too miraculous.”<sup>1</sup> Chaucer has given us, in the Prioress’ and Second Nun’s tales, two such legends. In the former he tells of the little boy who sang “*O Alma’ loude and clere*” after his throat had been cut to the “nekke-boon”; in the latter, of St. Cecelia, who (to mention a single incident from her thrilling biography) was put in a bath beneath which a great fire had been built;—

The longe night and eek a day also,  
For al the fyr and eek the bathes hete,  
She sat al cold, and felede no wo,  
It made hir nat a drope for to swete.

Both of these stories are highly appropriate in the mouths of their narrators; but if Chaucer, by calling the tales of Cleopatra and Thisbe “legends,” intends to relegate them to the same class as the two just mentioned, it need not be asked how deep a faith he wishes his readers to place in them as transcripts of real life. This contention is corroborated by Chaucer’s use of the word “legend” in the *Canterbury Tales*. When we bear in mind that the Wife of Bath had contempt for “legends,” while

<sup>1</sup> *Studies*, II, 322. See, also, *ibid.*, 488.

Chauntecleer trusted them implicitly, we know practically what Chaucer himself thought of them. The scorn of the Wife of Bath for her fifth husband's tales of "wicked wyves" will be remembered, and it is significant that she twice<sup>1</sup> uses the word "legend" in referring to them; while it is the superstitious arch-egoist Chauntecleer, who, after telling the story of St. Kenelm—how at the age of seven a vision of his own murder came to him in a dream—exclaims to the ignorant Pertelote,

By god, I hadde lever than my sherte (300)

That ye had rad his legende, as have I.

After that, do we need to ask any further whether Chaucer, if he were suddenly to awake in the twentieth century, would have to consult a dictionary in order to understand our use of "legend"? It is a plain case. Chaucer, condemned for offences against Cupid to write in praise of feminine virtue, produces—a "Legend" of good women, a "Seintes Legende of Cupyde"! What an infinitely Chaucerian jest! And the fact that Alceste herself suggests the title, "a glorious Legende of Gode Wommen," but deepens the irony.

And Chaucer, by another device peculiar to the B Prologue, has rendered his tales of virtuous ladies even more shadowy and "legendary" than ever. When we compare the last couplets of A and B, two interesting alterations are discovered:

A        And with that word of sleep I gan a-wake,  
          And right thus on my Legend gan I make.

B        And with that word my bokes gan I take,  
          And right thus on my Legend gan I make.

In A Chaucer awakes. In B he does not. In other words, in B, the stories of good women, even on the assumption that they are quite above reproach as examples of feminine virtue, have only a dream reality—a manifest heightening of the jest.

The other change in the couplet just quoted is also interesting: "my bokes gan I take"! With that very word "bokes" the reader's thoughts return to the introduction (binding the whole Prologue in a perfect unity), especially to the couplet:

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<sup>1</sup> 686 and 742.

Wel oghte us than honouren and beleve (27)  
 These bokes, ther we han non other preve.

"Well may I turn to my ancient volumes," Chaucer seems to say, "for I shall never find any trace of a good woman outside the covers of a book." And this shows—what it is exceedingly important for us to notice—that even though every one of the legends be written in a perfectly serious vein, they still serve a humorous purpose and the poem as a whole remains a satire. If, however, even these examples of ancient virtue are found under examination to be of a somewhat dubious nature, then the satire will be all the keener.

That some of the subjects which Chaucer has chosen for his legends are very curiously (*sehr eigenthümlich*) adapted to their ostensible purpose seems long since to have been felt by more than one critic of the *Legend*. To choose the *Heroides* of Ovid—a book which contains such tales as those of Phedra and Canace—as the principal source of a work upon good<sup>1</sup> women is, to begin with, strange enough. But most infelicitous of all is the singling out of Cleopatra to stand first among the models of ancient virtue, a choice which, coming from Cupid himself, constitutes further evidence, perhaps, of the questionable character of his literary education. *Apropos* of this choice of Cleopatra, Professor Lounsbury remarks in his *Studies*: "The selection of her at all is, to say the least, singular for a scholar. While much can be conceded to the exigencies of fiction, it is of a nature to startle the reader to find an addition to the lives of the saints made by representing Cleopatra as a martyr for love. The Queen of Egypt presents peculiar difficulties to him who attempts to make her course of conduct serve as a lesson to faithless man of the beauty of feminine devotion."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The adjective "good" in this poem, it is perhaps superfluous to remark, means much more than merely *faithful* to the marriage or betrothal bond. Chaucer's words for *faithful* and *faithfulness* are, consistently, "trewe" and "trouthe." "Good Alceste," *e. g.*, is *good* because of her self-sacrificing love.

<sup>2</sup> II, 185.

Dr. Mather in the introduction to his selections from the *Canterbury Tales* speaks of the story of Phyllis as "almost burlesqued."<sup>1</sup> And Professor Lounsbury again, speaking of another of the legends, says: "The tale of Philomela is really a tale of man's infidelity and brutal cruelty. It is not in any sense one of woman's devotion or of her martyrdom for love."<sup>2</sup> Now the question I would raise is whether these words of Professor Lounsbury's may not be applied—even though their application be less striking in some other cases—to nearly all of the legends. The possible exceptions would be the *Cleopatra*, the *Thisbe*, and the *Hypermnestra*, though even the *Hypermnestra* contains two thoroughly cruel and cowardly men. Indeed, as we read these tales of model women, we are confronted with an astonishing absence of positive virtues. Chaucer's principal formula for proving a woman good is to make her the victim of a bad man. All women, whatever their own part in the affair may have been, who are betrayed by false lovers are—presto!—fit subjects for canonization: such is the delightful logic with which Chaucer manufactures new martyrs and sings the praises of woman. A more exact, if less ironical, title for the poem would be *The Legend of Bad Men*.

Another interesting fact is that a majority of these betrayed heroines either die of broken hearts or violently fordo themselves—the decided preference being for the latter form of exit from the miseries of existence. Now suicide, under these circumstances, is doubtless a proof of the greatest virtue, even though our own rather unsentimental age may not so regard it. But the matter becomes "curiously" confusing when we remember that Chaucer, unfortunately, shows himself in this respect egregiously modern—witness his treatment of the theme in the *Troilus*!—and was far better fitted to make fun of death for unrequited love than to dwell upon its infinite pathos.

But all these matters, and many others, may best be handled by a separate consideration of each of the legends. The discus-

<sup>1</sup> *Riverside Literature Series*, no. 135, p. xxix.

<sup>2</sup> *Studies*, III, 337.

sion has shown, it is thought, that the Prologue is satirical. The reader will hardly be proceeding unnaturally, then, if he is on the outlook for satirical touches in the stories themselves, and attention may be called at the outset to the fact that Chaucer himself has given us a rather specific hint, in the last paragraph of the Prologue, as to how the first legend at least should be interpreted.

### CLEOPATRA.

It has long been recognized that a favorite form, perhaps *the* favorite form, of Chaucer's humor is the seemingly innocent statement which, however, upon examination, reveals a possible second meaning, usually containing some sly thrust or roguish sally.<sup>1</sup> Chaucer, of course, is not the only writer who employs these Delphic utterances, but the characteristic which seems to make his use of them unique is the *extreme* slyness and delicacy with which he is capable of investing the insinuation, a slyness and delicacy so extreme that to those not acquainted with Chaucer insistence on the presence of a second meaning seems like absurd supersubtlety, while oftentimes, even among those who know the poet and are on the lookout for just this sort of thing, doubt may remain in some cases whether or not the *double-entendre* is deliberate. The constant recurrence of this sort of thing in Chaucer's works, however, justifies, to say the least, a careful examination of all suspicious statements. Let us take an illustration. The Somnour, at the conclusion of his prologue in the *Tales* (his interchanges with the Friar have already afforded much merriment), remarks:

God save yow alle, save this cursed Frere;

My prologe wol I ende in this manere.

The former of these two lines, it will be conceded, takes on a

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<sup>1</sup> I may take this opportunity of saying that it was Professor Lounsbury's delightful treatment of this matter in his *Studies* which first awakened me to the perception of this kind of humor in Chaucer. The present contention merely is that the *Legend of Good Women* is a supreme example of this same principle of humor, applied, not merely to single phrases and lines, but to a whole poem.

meaning which varies perceptibly according as the second "save" is a verb or a preposition. And as a further example, I may quote, without comment, from the *Merchant's Tale*, the couplet:

How mighte a man han any adversitee  
That hath a wyf? Certes, I can nat seye.

Now the connection of all this with the subject is the fact that there occurs a couplet of just this suspicious nature in the last paragraph of the B Prologue. If the appearance there of this nicely two-edged utterance is to be attributed to chance alone, it certainly affords one of the most remarkable instances of the perversity of language ever recorded. If it is not there by chance, it is sufficient in itself to prove Chaucer's satirical purpose in the *Legend*.<sup>1</sup> The couplet is this (the God of Love has just ordered Chaucer to write the story of Cleopatra):

For lat see now what man that lover be,  
Wol doon so strong a peyne for love as she.

This, as Cupid certainly intends and as the casual reader would certainly gather, is equivalent to the question: "Where can the *man* be found who will suffer for love as much as Cleopatra suffered?" And the implied answer is, "Nowhere!" But it is clear that the lines are open to another interpretation. They may simply mean: "For now let us behold the lover who ('what man that lover be') will suffer as much for love as Cleopatra suffered." And the man referred to is, of course,—Antony. Indeed, the first legend is merely an expansion of this second interpretation of the couplet. In Chaucer's words:

But love had brought this man in swiche a rage, (20)  
And him so narwe bounden in his las,  
Al for the love of Cleopataras,  
*That al the world he sette at no value.*  
Him thoughte, nas to him no thing so due

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<sup>1</sup> There are other passages of the same sort in the Prologue, to one of which, in particular, later reference will be made. Note, especially, some of Chaucer's interrogations, where the implied answer may really be very far from the actually intended one; for example:

What seith also the epistels of Ovyde (A, 305)  
Of trewe wyves and of hir labour?



As Cleopatras for to love and serve;  
*Him roghte nat in armes for to sterve*  
*In the defence of hir, and of hir right.*

Antony, when he sees that Cleopatra is flying, pierces "himself anoon through-out the herte." Cleopatra (the noble woman!), having discovered that Caesar will offer her no mercy, makes tracks toward Egypt "for drede and for distresse." There, after elaborate preparations for death, she begins this affecting address to her lover:

Now love, to whom my sorweful herte obeyde (102)  
 So ferforthly that, fro that blisful houre

That I yow swor to been al frely youre—

Suddenly—a horrible thought strikes her! She has sworn oaths resembling this to several gentlemen in the course of her life—what if the wrong one should appropriate this carefully prepared address to himself! Suggestion too terrible to mention! But Cleopatra is resourceful to the last, and without a moment's hesitation, inserts *extempore*, after the words just quoted, a line of identification,

I mene yow, Antonius my knight!—

and the oration is carried successfully through, followed shortly after by her death among the serpents. Now all this, doubtless, was very noble on Cleopatra's part, but the question remains whether Antony's suicide—in spite of the fact that his antemortem statement was, as compared with hers, a distinctly shorter and less polished product—is not to be considered just as heroic? Professor Lounsbury remarks on this legend: "Even in the story as told by Chaucer, Antony is not only the more in

<sup>1</sup> It is plain that lines 87-89 are corrupt or out of place (owing, doubtless, to the carelessness of some scribe), for surely Chaucer would not have chosen the very moment when Antony kills himself and when Cleopatra, after her failure to compromise matters with Caesar, flees—to exclaim:

Ye men, that falsly sweren many an ooth  
 That ye wol dye, if that your love be wrooth,  
 Heer may ye seen of women which a trouthe!

This last phrase, too, seems somewhat ambiguous.

earnest of the two, he is much more of a martyr."<sup>1</sup> Chaucer clearly was of the same opinion, and Cupid was little aware of the real purport of his remark when he said:

For lat see now what man that lover be,  
Wol doon so strong a peyne for love as she.

As an execution of Alceste's command to write

Of Gode Wommen, maidenen and wyves,  
That weren trewe in lovinge al hir lyves;  
And telle of false men that hem bitrayen,

Chaucer's story of Cleopatra can be adjudged only a limited success.

In connection with these observations, the last three lines<sup>2</sup> of this legend are of special interest. Referring to Cleopatra's death, the poet remarks:

Now er I finde a man thus trewe and stable,  
And wol for love his deeth so freely take,  
I pray god let our hedes never ake!

*Explicit Legenda Cleopatrie, Martiris.*

This curiously back-handed statement seems all the more curious (*eigenthümlich*) coming at the end of a tale about a man who

<sup>1</sup> *Studies*, II, 185.

<sup>2</sup> The line preceding these three is also worthy of note. When Chaucer has concluded his tale he remarks:

And this is storial sooth, hit is no fable.

Professor Skeat gives in his glossary, with a reference to this line, *storial sooth*=historical truth. Yet one of Professor Skeat's own definitions of *storie* is "legend of a saint (or the like)" [see Prologue to *C. Tales*, 709; also Miller's Prologue, 71], and it is worth while in this connection to remember that the Nun's Priest, speaking of his story of Chauntecleer, remarks:

*This storie* is al-so trewe, I undertake,  
As is the book of Launcelot de Lake,  
That wommen holde in ful gret reverence.

Now when we bear in mind that in the *Canterbury Tales* the physician says of his story of Appius and Virginia,

this is no fable

But known for historial thing notable,

is it going too far to suggest that there was a delicate distinction in Chaucer's mind between *storial sooth* and a *historial thing*?

*did* "for love his deeth so freely take." The author has already suggested that there is a certain distinction between real women and the heroines of legends. Does he now infer that there is likewise a difference between a man and the hero of *olde stories*? May I never have the head-ache, Chaucer says, in effect, till I find a man who will commit suicide for a broken heart. When I find such a fool, he says by implication, then let my head begin to ache. (Evidently Scogan was not that fool!)

In addition to the couplet selected as a basis for the discussion of the first legend, there is another passage, also in the last paragraph of the B Prologue, which is of interest in connection not only with the *Cleopatra*, but with several others of the stories.

The God of Love gives Chaucer certain directions as to how to compose his legends. He does not wish him to be too lengthy or to enter into too circumstantial description of all the events in the lives of his heroines:

I wot wel that thou mayst nat *al* hit ryme,  
That swiche lovers diden in hir tyme;  
It were to long to reden and to here;  
Suffyceth me, thou make in this manere,  
That thou reherce of al hir lyf the grete,  
After thise olde auctours listen to trete.  
For who-so shal so many a storie telle,  
Sey shortly, or he shal to longe dwelle.

This advice, considering the subject of the *Legend*, the praise of feminine virtue and constancy, and considering, still more, the women chosen to exemplify these qualities, shows a commendable foresight on the part of Cupid. More than one of these heroines were, as we should say today, "women with a past," and to arrange a scheme of narration that shall spare the reader painful revelations concerning these virtuous women is indeed a mercy. For instance, if Chaucer had been compelled to relate *in extenso*—at the beginning of the first legend—the story of how Cleopatra poisoned her younger brother Ptolemy, might not some overscrupulous reader with a too retentive memory

fail to be properly affected by her pure devotion to Antony and by the beauty of her sacrifice to love—in the pit of serpents? (That pit of serpents, by the way, is an artistic addition to the story for which Chaucer has never received due credit.) Or take Medea! There were probably some fathers and mothers among Chaucer's readers. How thankful, then, the poet must have been that he had Love's permission to omit the story of how Medea sliced up her children—not to mention such other little episodes<sup>1</sup> in her career as the occasion when, to delay her pursuing father, she cut her brother in pieces, and strewed the fragments of his body along the road, or when, promising thereby to restore his youth, she persuaded the three daughters of Pelias to tear asunder the limbs of their father. And then the tale of Progne and Philomela!—as a *legend of good women* what an anticlimax it would have been if Chaucer, bound down to a minutely historic method, had been obliged, after the story of Tereus' cruelty to the sisters, to tell how they in turn cooked Tereus' little boy and served him up, as a banquet, to his father! That certainly would have left a bad taste in the mouth. Or, to take one more example, the legend of Hypermnestra! Suppose Chaucer had been required to present all its ramifications! How embarrassing that might have proved! He would have had to tell how Hypermnestra's forty-nine sisters killed their husbands on their wedding night. Now all that, even though narrated in the most bloody and realistic manner, would have in no way detracted from the virtue of Hypermnestra—in fact it would have enhanced it by the contrast. Yet even without being too coldly mathematical, is it wholly fanciful to raise the query whether, as part of a poem whose subject is the goodness of woman in general rather than the goodness of any individual, the narrative of those forty-nine murderesses might not have had a slightly irrelevant effect? I judge that Chaucer was wise in leaving it out; and Cupid—wise beyond his years in permitting the omission.

<sup>1</sup> These are both referred to in Epistle xii of the *Heroides*. In fact that epistle is little more than a story of the crimes of Medea.

Chaucer, then, makes ample use of the instructions of the God of Love, and no one can deny that his *Legend* is rendered thereby much more entertaining. That he was conscious of what he was doing a single example will show. In the *Cleopatra*, Chaucer tells us, at the outset, of his heroine's love for Antony and of the latter's virtues, facts for which he vouches "but-if that bokes lye" (a most unkind suspicion, by the way, to insert right in the heat of the story—that thought that books might possibly prove untrustworthy—especially when we remember that they are our only source of information concerning good women); the author then goes on to say of Cleopatra:

And she was fair as is the rose in May.

And, for to maken shortly is the beste,

She wex his wyf, and hadde him as her leste.

Now though there is surely a close causal relationship between the first and third lines of this quotation, it would not be improper to say that there exists a sort of hiatus between them—something, so to speak, like certain of the unwritten chapters of *Tristram Shandy*. Cleopatra, of course, was young and giddy, and Chaucer, seeing that a full account of her courtship with Antony might cause a pang to some of her admirers, remembers opportunely Cupid's remark,

I wot wel that thou mayst nat *al* hit ryme,

That swiche lovers diden in hir tyme,

and wisely passes on with the remark, "for to maken shortly is the beste." He is equally judicious when he comes to the point in his original where, after the suicide of Antony, Cleopatra, apparently unmoved by her lover's death, tries her seductive wiles on Caesar, this whole distressing episode being dismissed with the tactful abridgment:

His wyf, that coude of Cesar have no grace.

But Chaucer's crowning kindness to Cleopatra is his omission to say (what Florus blurts out with the most unblushing frankness) that the real motive which led to the Queen's death, so far from being love for Antony, was the fear of figuring, in an undignified role, in Caesar's triumphal procession.

The philosophy back of all these chivalric silences of Chaucer has been expounded in an earlier passage of the legend:

The wedding and the feste to devyse,  
To me, that have y-take swiche empyrse  
Of so many a storie for to make,  
Hit were to long, lest that I sholde slake  
Of thing that bereth more effect and charge;  
For men may overlade a ship or barge;  
And forthy to th' effect than wol I skippe,  
And al the remenant, I wol lete hit slippe.

This comparison of the heaping up of material irrelevant to his theme of good women to the overloading of a ship is certainly very effective. Chaucer might easily have overfreighted, and so upset, his *Legend*. But why does he speak of his work as "swiche empyrse" and of "so many a storie for to make"? Surely the nine legends do not form such an enormous volume. Ah, but I forgot!—the *Legend* is unfinished, and here at the beginning, in the first flush of his inspiration, Chaucer was planning, perhaps, after singing the praises of the ladies of his ballad, to write the lives of the

twenty thousand mo sittinge (559)  
.....that been good wommen allee

And trewe of love, for aught that may befall.

With more than twenty thousand biographies before him, the poet might well feel the necessity of avoiding prolixity.

This last point suggests the question whether, after all, these observations concerning the reasons for Chaucer's omissions have not been decidedly supersubtle, whether a great deal has not been made out of a very insignificant matter. Chaucer's works are overflowing with just such notices to his readers that he intends to avoid prolixity. Has not the belief that the *Legend* is a satire begun to dictate to the facts? Is not the text being forced to conform with a theory? During the rest of the discussion of the legends, at any rate, it shall be assumed, very rigorously, that the tales are perfectly serious, and instead of searching for satirical matter, the method shall be adopted of seeing how far

such passages as oversuspicious persons might deem ironical may be explained away.

### THISBE.

[When we consider the last three lines of the *Cleopatra*,

Now, er I finde a man thus trewe and stable,

And wol for love his deeth so freely take,

I pray god lat our hedes never ake!

—it is apparent that they must have been written before Chaucer ever heard of Pyramus. It requires no critical acumen whatever, therefore, to perceive that the story of Thisbe (doubtless through the carelessness of some scribe) has wandered from its proper place among the legends; for, even though the poet's final arrangement of his tales was not in the order of their composition, it is perfectly plain that his sense for variety and contrast would have led him to separate by a considerable space the stories of Antony and Pyramus. There can be no harm, however, in discussing the latter in its traditional place.]

Of all Chaucer's heroines in the *Legend*, Thisbe is perhaps the most attractive. Not that she is *entirely* without blemish. Her midnight tryst with her lover, for instance, outside the walls of Babylon, was hardly according to the canons of modern, or, one might add, mediaeval, propriety. Indeed Thisbe herself seems to recognize, in the end, that her conduct was scarcely in conformity even with Babylonian convention:

And lat no gentil woman her assure (203)

To putten her in swiche an aventure.

Yet, after all, we do not wish even a good woman to be too good—to run the risk of being faultily faultless—and in addition to that Thisbe was a mere girl and her parents were unreasonably despotic; at any rate there is such a halo of romance over her and over the moonlit scene of her misfortune that we readily forgive any slight breach of decorum on her part. That the meeting of the lovers involved nothing more than this and was to be of the most innocent sort, Chaucer plainly suggests when he alters or suppresses several phrases of Ovid's to which only the

most cynical-minded person would ever think of attaching a questionable implication.

In the story of Pyramus and Thisbe Chaucer has the most intrinsically affecting of his themes. But, on the other hand, precisely because of its deep and pure pathos, that theme, in sacrilegious and unfeeling hands, is one that lends itself pre-eminently to burlesque; we all know, how, two centuries after Chaucer, Shakespeare profaned this beautiful tale of the cruel lioness.<sup>1</sup> Now if Chaucer really had any maliciously satirical intent behind his poem, is not this legend just the place where we might naturally expect to find evidence of it; and, conversely, will not the complete absence of any comic touches from the legend of Thisbe be the most convincing of proofs that there is nothing satirical in any of the other stories?

With what entire seriousness Chaucer conducts his narrative, may be indicated by the statement that his account is an almost word-for-word rendering of the passage in the fourth book of the *Metamorphoses*. Unlike the sources of most of his legends, Chaucer evidently felt, in the case of the story of Thisbe, that his original was sufficiently pathetic, and might, on the whole, be allowed to speak for itself; his alterations, therefore, consist mainly in the addition, here and there, of some delicate com-

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<sup>1</sup> One comparison will be sufficient to indicate the difference in spirit between the two poets. Just before the death of his heroine, while Thisbe is mingling her moans with her lover's blood, Chaucer condenses the whole pathetic scene into a single vivid line (a line not present, be it noted, in the Latin):

And with his blood herselfen gan she peynte. (170)

Put beside that simply tragic statement of fact the high-flown appeal to the Fates of the Thisbe of *A Midsummer-Night's Dream*:

O Sisters Three,  
Come, come to me,  
With hands as pale as milk;  
Lay them in gore,

and we have the difference between Chaucer's treatment of the theme and—parody. Such evidence as this, adding immeasurably to the weight of merely chronological considerations, makes it finally certain that Chaucer borrowed nothing from Shakespeare. The phrase "O wicked wall" is plainly a mere coincidence.



ment<sup>1</sup> or suggestion, or, on the other hand, perhaps, some equally trivial suppression or variation<sup>2</sup> in the prasing. The perfect

<sup>1</sup> The earliest of these consists of the lines (touching the growing acquaintance of Pyramus and Thisbe):

The name of everich gan to other springe (14)  
By wommen, that were neighebores aboute.  
For in that contree yit, withouten doute,  
Maidens been y-kept, for jelosye,  
Ful streite, lest they diden som folye.

The first part of this passage (a substitute for Ovid's *Consciuis omnis abest*) constitutes a graceful recognition of that instinctive interest in others (sympathy, one might call it), which, knowing neither time nor place, is found wherever womankind is present—a recognition inserted with peculiar aptness, it will be conceded, in a Legend of Good Women. What the latter part of the passage refers to is less obvious, but whatever it means, it is plainly an improvement in the story, for, were it not, Chaucer would certainly have made no alteration.

The second important addition occurs (where Thisbe steals in secret from the city) in the lines:

For alle her frendes—for to save her trouthe— (93)  
She hath for-sake; alas! and that is routhe  
That ever woman wolde be so trewe  
To trusten man, but she the bet him knewe!

Evidently the text is contaminated at this point (by 'Adam' or some other equally wretched scrivener perhaps), for to say *she hath for-sake alle her frendes for to save her trouthe* is palpably to fly in the face of all logic and utter the veriest nonsense. The latter part of this quotation, together with the only other considerable passage added by Chaucer, is commented on below.

<sup>2</sup> It is indeed true that these variations in the phrasing sometimes seem to alter the sense of the original and it is of course possible to imagine an uncouth and ill-starred critic contending that Chaucer was consciously attempting a ridiculous effect. "Take the suicide of Pyramus, for instance!" (we seem to hear this ill-favored one exclaiming)—

"And with that worde he smoot him to the herte. (145)  
The blood out of the wounde as brode sterte  
As water, whan the conduit broken is.

Thou, too, O Pyramus, as well as thine evil brothers of the *Legend*, wast a bloody man!" But such criticism is as futile as it is boorish. It may be granted that Chaucer has failed to get the full significance of the beautiful figure in the Latin, but one must remember that the poet's knowledge of that language was of the rough and ready sort, and the word *conduit*, furthermore, even though it usually did mean an aqueduct in Middle English, may well have had a dozen other meanings.

gravity of Chaucer's narrative, therefore, may be regarded as established—for how can a story be humorous which contains not a single humorous line? You cannot make a red house out of blue bricks.

This main point being settled, one is prepared to admit, with the utmost cheerfulness, that the legend of Thisbe, even less than that of Cleopatra, carries out Alceste's injunction to write of true women betrayed by false men. That Pyramus is far enough from being one of those men

That al hir lyf ne doon nat but assayen (B 487)

How many wommen they may doon a shame,  
is not only proved by his suicide but is admitted by Thisbe herself, when, just before plunging the dagger in her breast, she exclaims:

But god forbede but a woman can (205)

Been as trewe and loving as a man!

Chaucer, to be sure, in the early part of the tale, does his utmost (another indication that he is performing his task with perfect soberness) to blacken the character of Pyramus, remarking when Thisbe departs to keep the tryst:

allas! and that is routhe (94)

That ever woman wolde be so trewe

To trusten man, but she the bet him knewe!<sup>1</sup>

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Or again, take the awful moment when Thisbe, searching for her lover in the moonlight, suddenly comes upon him

Beting with his heles on the ground. (158)

This, to be sure, is not an exactly literal version of Ovid's  
tremebunda videt pulsare cruentum

Membra solum.

Chaucer has, indeed, added a subtle connotation, due, possibly, in part, to the rendering by *heles* of *tremebunda membra*, but in its inner nature defying analysis. But to suggest that this evanescent something in any way savors of burlesque is (as was also the case with the *conduit* passage) to be totally insensible to one of the poet's fundamental qualities—his naive realism. Chaucer (as we have often been told) is like a child. Is not the discrepancy, then, between the passages just quoted, exactly what we should expect when an author as sophisticated as Ovid is rendered by one as ingenuous as Chaucer?

<sup>1</sup> Thisbe had seen very little of Pyramus. The hole in the wall, it will be remembered, was small.

Yet even this, Chaucer perceives, is not enough, and evidently realizing that the voluntary death of the hero may somewhat detract from the force of his instance, the poet hastens to add, when his story is over, that this case of Pyramus is a highly exceptional one, and he acknowledges the deep felicity (*deyntee*) which it affords "us men" to hear of a man who can be faithful in love:

Of trewe men I finde but fewe mo (212)

In alle my bokes, save this Piramus.

Only a person in that unwarrantable mood which, as was said at the beginning, is to be studiously avoided in this discussion of the legends, would think of suspecting that Chaucer, by the phrase "in alle my bokes," intends to suggest that the place to look for true *men* is in real life rather than in literature.

#### DIDO.

We now come to the case of Dido. Chaucer's main authority is Vergil.

I coude folwe, word for word, Virgyle, (79)

But it wolde lasten al to longe a whyle,

and it would also, Chaucer might have added, have involved various other difficulties, such, for instance, as the translation of a passage like

Ille meos, primus qui me sibi iunxit, amores (iv, 28)

Abstulit; ille habeat secum servetque sepulcro,

in connection with Dido's later exclamation,

Non servata fides, cineri promissa Sychaeo! (iv, 552)

or of a line like,

Coniugium vocat; hoc praetexit nomine culpam, (iv, 172)

or of the well-known,

Varium et mutabile semper

Femina,

a maxim highly inappropriate, it will be recognized, to appear in a work upon good women. And Chaucer's omissions from Ovid, his other source, are equally discerning.<sup>1</sup> Now if he had

<sup>1</sup> For example:

Exige, laese pudor, poenas! violate Sychaei. . . . . (97)

really wished to be satirical, might he not have seized on these very aspects of his originals—and written a travesty on woman's faithfulness? Could we ask for clearer proof, then, of his serious purpose than the fact that he omits these questionable passages, and instead of following his authorities servilely, gives, to a considerable extent, his own account of the affair?

Earlier in life, in the *Book of the Duchesse*, Chaucer had written:

Another rage (731)

Had Dydo, quene eek of Cartage,  
That slow hir-self, for Eneas  
Was fals; whiche a fool she was!—

but no such irreverent exclamation as this last line mars Chaucer's considerate treatment of the Queen in the *Legend*. One of the most significant points is the fact that the poet generously omits all mention of Dido's marriage with Sichaeus, for good women are ordinarily supposed to remain true to their first loves. Even the reader of Chaucer's account, however, cannot help admitting that there were certain aspects of Dido's career which make it impossible to set her up as, *in all respects*, a model of womanly virtue. Take, for instance, that matter of her going into the cave with Aeneas without a chaperon. To be sure there was a thunder storm—and an unusually heavy one at that. But to show that the suggestion is not hypercritical, and as evidence that the questionable propriety of her conduct had occurred even to Chaucer himself, one may quote the lines:

And shortly, fro the tempest her to save,  
She fledde her-self into a litel cave,  
And with her wente this Eneas also;  
I noot, with hem if ther wente any mo;  
The autour maketh of hit no mencion.

Chaucer, it is clear, wishes to give Dido the benefit of every doubt, and suggests that in reality the lovers may not have been alone after all.

A peculiarly aggravated feature of Dido's case was the fact that, unlike some of her more fortunate sister-victims in the *Legend*, she had neglected to go through a marriage ceremony with her betrayer. This thought is so painful to Chaucer that he declares he "may nat wryte" of her complaint,

So greet a routhe I have hit for t'endyte, (422)

and he tenderly spares his readers a transcript of Dido's last letter to Aeneas, referring those who can endure its perusal to Ovid. In the few opening words of the letter, which Chaucer does give, it is worth while to note the line,

'But sin my name is lost through you,' quod she,  
a confession which clearly embodies another virtue of the Queen's—humility. Dido, as she looked back over her career, laid no claim to *absolute* perfection.

Chaucer, then, in his *Dido*, has made a very effective legend out of recalcitrant material. Perhaps it was the very love of setting himself a difficult task that led him to follow the *Aeneid* rather than the pre-Vergilian Dido legend in which the Queen perishes in a funeral pyre sooner than to prove faithless—by marriage with Iarbas—to her first husband, Sichaeus. That Chaucer knew this form of the story is attested by its presence in Jerome's treatise against Jovinian.

The name Iarbas suggests a word of final comment. Chaucer does not tell us how far Dido had acquiesced in the suit of this King who had "wowed her, to have her to his wyf," though he does tell us that it was pitiful to see Iarbas' sorrow when he was deserted. In the light of this fact it seems a little inappropriate for Chaucer to choose exactly this place to insert the lines:

O sely womman, ful of innocence,  
Ful of pitee, of trouthe, of conscience,  
What maked yow to men to trusten so?  
Have ye swich routhe upon hir feined wo,  
And han swich olde ensamples yow beforn?

etc. Now this "sely womman" is, of course, woman in general, and what she is chided for is her trust in false men like—

Aeneas. But coming in so suddenly just after the account of Dido's desertion of the King, the lines beginning "O sely womman" seem, unless one is on one's guard, to refer to Dido herself, and until the reader detects his own error, he wonders why Chaucer has selected the moment when Dido leaves Iarbas to commend her innocence, her pity, her truth, and her conscience. Doubtless through the error of some scribe (or scribes) the passage has wandered from its proper context.

#### HYPSIPYLE AND MEDEA.

The stories of Hypsipyle and Medea are brief and need not detain us long. Chaucer tells how the false Jason wooed and deserted them, and how, thereby, two more were added to the list of martyrs, two more affecting life records to the legends of the saints; while, as for Jason himself, he is painted in such black hues that the poet may well cry out:

Have at thee, Jasoun! now thyn horn is blowe! (16)  
Hypsipyle, though she does not appear on the scene till the short tale devoted to her is about half over, makes her entrance in the attractive role of one offering welcome to the becalmed wanderer. Open-armed hospitality was perhaps her crowning virtue. And if this willingness to receive the stranger went so far as to make her appear at times almost gullible, it must be remembered, first, that Jason was a past-master in the art of seduction, and, secondly, that one must always have the defects of one's qualities. It seems certain, for instance, that it must have been merely the defect of some quality—sympathy, perhaps—that led Hypsipyle, when Jason abandoned her, to express the wish that her rival might soon find herself deserted also and that she might murder both her children. This, at first blush, until we remember the provocation that prompted it, *does* seem a little cold-blooded, and we cannot help wishing that a good woman like Hypsipyle might have found it possible to spare the innocent children. At any rate, we are glad Chaucer found it possible to omit his heroine's last letter to Jason (from Ovid),

Which were to long to wryten and to sein, (198)  
 for it would have grieved us to think of her as being, even in  
 desire, the murderess of Medea ("Medeae Medea forem!"<sup>1</sup>)—  
 though as far as Medea herself was concerned, would not such  
 a fate have served her right for being fool enough to trust in  
 Jason?

Chaucer concludes the tale with the lines:

And trew to Jasoun was she al her lyf, (209)  
 And ever kepte her chast, as for his wyf;  
 Ne never had she joye at her herte,  
 But dyed, for his love, of sorwes smerte.

This is indeed a rare example of womanly devotion. In fact, Jason hardly seems worthy of such consecration. But on the other hand, woman's constancy becomes all the more pathetic when the man concerned is a blackguard and a villain.

The story of Medea is essentially that of Hypsipyle over again (how much of his past Jason revealed to his new love we do not know). Chaucer humanely omits the account of the killing of the children—and some other events in his heroine's life—and the Man of Law in his prologue shows that he does not know what he is talking about when he speaks of the *Legend* as giving a picture of

The crueltee of thee, queen Medea, (72)  
 Thy litel children hanging by the hals.

To speak of the "crueltee" of Medea is nonsense, for how could a good woman be cruel? If it be true that Medea really did kill her children she plainly must have done it while suffering from what in these days we should call a "brain storm." Chaucer was certainly wise in excluding the account of this unfortunate event. It may be remarked, in conclusion, that the poet also omits, as usual, the pitiful last letter of his heroine ("which

<sup>1</sup> See Heroides, vi. 149—151.

were as now to long for me to wryte"), referring those interested to Ovid.<sup>1</sup>

# LUCRETIA.

In the story of Lucrece, even more than in any of the previous legends, Chaucer's theme is a *bad man*. The poet is entirely conscious of the fact and declares explicitly, at the beginning, that he paints the blackness of Tarquin only in honor of the whiteness of Lucrece.

But for that cause telle I nat this storie, (5)

But for to preise and drawen to memorie

The verray wyf, the verray trewe Lucresse,

and again at the end when he has recounted

The horrible deed of her oppressioun, (189)

he repeats the statement:

I tell hit, for she was of love so trewe, (195)

Ne in her wille she chaunged for no newe.

Chaucer finds, then, in the tale of Tarquinius, a beautiful example of a woman's faithfulness to *one* man (Lucrece, that is, remaining true to Colatyne, does not let Tarquinius alienate her affections); to his heroine belonged that

stable herte, sad and kinde, (197)

That in these women men may alday finde;

Ther as they caste hir herte, ther hit dwelleth.

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<sup>1</sup> This omission, once more, is a well-advised one. Medea, unfortunately (we may perhaps venture to say *in a footnote*), had committed, unwittingly we will hope, a good many crimes in her day, and it would have rather marred the effect of his legend if Chaucer had had to translate, for instance, Ovid's lines (19-20) where Medea cries out to Jason, wishing that he had perished:

Quantum perfidiae tecum, scelerate, perisset,

Dempta forent capiti quam mal multa meo!

or where she exclaims to the brother she has murdered (115-116):

Quod facere ausa meast, non audet scribere dextra;

Sic ego, sed tecum, dilaceranda fui,

or finally, where, remembering the death of Pelias, she says to Jason (131-2):

Ut culpent alii, tibi me laudare necessest,

Pro quo sum totiens esse coacta nocens.



Only the most malicious-minded person, bent on finding satire whether it exist or not, could discover the sign of any interruption to the serious flow of this tragic and pathetic tale, One can imagine such a person, to be sure, affirming that Lucrece had ample opportunity to cry out during Tarquin's preliminary speech beginning,

I am the kinges sone, Tarquinius, (110)

and then pointing out that Chaucer himself has assigned four or five contradictory reasons for her failure to alarm the house. "First," (one can imagine this malicious-minded objector saying) "the poet says she was physically unable—presumably through fright—to utter a sound:

No word she spak, she hath no might therto; (117)  
secondly, he says she was mentally unable to phrase her utterance coherently:

What shal she sayn? her wit is al ago (118)

(whereas both of these lines are flatly contradicted by a later one—136—which asserts that it was only after Tarquin's second speech that

She loste bothe at-ones wit and breeth);

thirdly, he practically declares that she did not speak because there was no one to hear her:

To whom shal she compleyne, or make moon? (120)

fourthly, he asserts that she could not cry out because of physical incapacity, this time *external*:

What! shal she crye, or how shal she asterte (123)

That hath her by the throte, . . . . . ?

fifthly, in the phrase 'with swerde at herte' he returns to the first suggestion that fear was the deterrent cause; and finally on top of all this confusion, a confusion packed into a passage of only a few lines, he makes the surprising assertion:

She axeth grace, and seith al that she can. (125)

The natural inference is that this 'al she can' was not very much." Such criticism defeats its own end, and the best reply is a word or two from M. Bech's comparison of portions of this legend with its sources: "Während Ovid, gebildet an den meis-

terwerken griechischer sprache, zugleich in der blütezeit römischer literatur lebte, war es Ch., dem vater der englischen poesie, bestimmt, die noch im werden begriffene englische sprache für den poetischen gebrauch fast ganz neu zu bilden und zu fixieren. Kein wunder also, wenn er nicht diese gewalt über die sprache hat, wenn er nicht so mit ihr spielen kann wie der römische dichter, der dabei durch sein ungewöhnliches talent, die ihm nachgerühmte *luxuries ingenii*, unterstützt wurde. Dies verhältniss ist zu berücksichtigen, wenn wir die verse (Fasten II, 759 ff.):

Illa revixit,

Deque viri collo dulce pendit onus

so übersetzt finden (v. 64ff.):

And she anoon up roos, with blysful chere,

And kyssed hym, as of wives ys the wone.

Oder wenn unser dichter das kunstvolle distichon (805):

Instat amans hostis precibus pretioque minisque

Nec prece nec pretio, nec movet ille minis

wiedergibt mit den worten (v. 125):

She axeth grace, and seyde al that she kan.”<sup>1</sup>

It has long since been pointed out that Chaucer has committed a curious blunder at the end of the *Lucretia*. He writes:

For wel I wot, that Crist him-selve telleth, (200)

That in Israel, as wyd as is the lond,

That so gret feith in al the lond he ne fond

As in a woman.

This *woman* upon examination turns out to be—the Roman Centurion! The error itself is insignificant,<sup>2</sup> but coming in a *Legend of Good Women*, a poem in which the faithfulness of woman is contrasted with the faithlessness of man, it is surely unfortunate enough. It is merely one more tribute to the un-failing accuracy of scholarship of the Germans that it was a critic of that nation (M. Bech) who pointed out this (under the circumstances) important error, an error which he hastens

<sup>1</sup> *Anglia*, v. 333.

<sup>2</sup> A not dissimilar error occurs in the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*.

to correct in the interest of our sex. These are his own words: "Eine ungenauigkeit dagegen hat sich Ch. zu schulden kommen lassen bei einem citate aus der bibel, das ich mir im interesse unseres geschlechtes zu berichtigen erlaube."<sup>1</sup>

Chaucer ends the *Lucretia* with his usual note of warning:

as of men, loketh which tirannye (204)

They doon alday; assay hem who so liste,

The trewest is ful brotel for to triste,

a moral somewhat weakened, one is compelled to confess, by the unfortunate blunder of which mention has just been made.

#### ARIADNE.

The story of Ariadne, it must be frankly admitted, seems one of the least successfully handled of the legends, mainly for the reason that Chaucer does not appear to have availed himself, as fully as he might, of Cupid's permission to leave out extraneous matter. For instance, the story begins with an account of how Nisus' daughter, out of love for Minos, betrayed her native city and how "he quitte her kindenesse" by letting her drown in sorrow and distress. Now of course it serves Chaucer's purpose to mention as many bad men as possible, and what Nisus' daughter did was done, to be sure, for love. But the fact that she was a traitress remains, nevertheless, in a poem of this sort, a distinctly jarring element. Then, too, Phedra, Ariadne's sister, has a part in the story at times too prominent. Chaucer tells us that she was fairer than her sister, and she seems to have been, also, intellectually superior. At any rate it was she who devised the scheme of the clew of twine, as a guide from the maze, and who hit on the bright idea of feeding caramels to the Minotaur. When, therefore, leaving Ariadne sleeping on the island, she elopes with her sister's lover, and Chaucer exclaims:

Thise false lovers, poison be hir bane! (303)

we wonder whether he refers to masculine "lovers" in general

<sup>1</sup> *Anglia*, v. 336.

or to the eloping pair, Theseus and Phedra, and we feel, whatever he means, that all this is very disconcerting in a *Legend of Good Women*. Phedra, or whoever was to play the part of the false woman, should have been kept more in the background. Then there is another point. In the days of Theseus it may have been the custom for women to propose, but considering the manners of his own day, would it not have been better for Chaucer to have put a little less baldly the fact that the offer of marriage came from Ariadne (especially since she arranges, incidentally, another match for her sister)?

But whatever is said of Ariadne at first, it must be conceded that she becomes very affecting at the end, in her apostrophe to the bed. (How this article of household furniture came on the desert isle—"ther as ther dwelte creature noon save wilde bestes"—is not explained.) Chaucer does not give the whole of her complaint, but refers the reader to "Naso's" epistle, remarking:

Hit is so long, hit were an hevy thing. (334)

By "hevy" he perhaps means "causing a heavy heart." The poet ends the legend with the succinct lines,

I wol no more speke of this matere;  
But thus this false lover can begyle  
His trewe love. The devil him quyte his whyle!

It has long since been pointed out that Chaucer has committed a curious blunder in this legend. Theseus is twenty-three years old and yet has a son of marriageable age. This is made all the stranger if we accept his declaration that for seven years he has been, though from afar, the "servant" of Ariadne. Even Theseus would hardly have dared openly make this assertion unless his former wife had been dead before these seven years began. Seven from twenty-three leaves sixteen. The whole thing becomes an interesting, but withal a rather baffling, problem in arithmetic.

## PHILOMELA.

In none of the other legends, not even the *Lucretia*, does Chaucer demonstrate so triumphantly as in the *Philomela* that the best way of showing the whiteness of woman is by painting the blackness of man. It may in all literalness be said that Chaucer proves the eminent virtue of Philomela by showing how Tereus mistreated her, cut out her tongue, and shut her up in prison. "*Cut out her tongue and shut her up in prison*—a neat formula under the conditions of which any woman might be virtuous!" is the sneer with which the malicious-minded person, already referred to, will probably greet this statement.

Chaucer is equally happy in his omissions. He brings his story to an end with the meeting of Progne and Philomela, remarking that

The remenant is no charge for to telle, (156)

a very true comment, for the grewsome account of how the sisters revenged themselves might make the reader less keenly appreciative of other aspects of the tale more important for Chaucer's immediate purpose.<sup>1</sup> Chaucer concludes the legend by telling women that, if they so desire, they may beware of men, observing of the best man that, even though he prove no murderer,

Ful litel whyle shul ye trewe him have, (164)  
That wol I seyn, al were he now my brother,  
But hit so be that he may have non other.

## PHYLLIS.

The story of Phyllis is much like that of Ariadne. Chaucer in the earlier legend speaks of Ariadne as the "wyf" of Theseus—though a careful perusal of the text would seem to indicate

<sup>1</sup> M. Bech remarks in this connection: "Die schreckliche rache der Progne wird er unerwähnt gelassen haben, nicht nur um damit nicht gegen die tendenz seines werkes zu verstossen, sondern auch um seinen besonderen leserkreis nicht durch die sich dabei offenbarende rohheit zu verletzen. Von diesem letzteren gesichtspunkte aus hat Ch. überhaupt verschiedene zu haarsträubende züge mit recht und erfolg zu mildern gesucht." *Anglia*, v, 342.

that the marriage ceremony, if it occurred, must have been an extraordinarily brief one. In the *Phyllis*, however, occurs a passage from which the plain inference is that Ariadne was *not* married to Theseus, an inference corroborated by Ariadne's confession that even though succor were to come to her on the desert island, she *dare* not return home. The passage in the *Phyllis* is as follows:

Ye han wel herd of Theseus devyse (66)  
 In the betraying of fair Adriane,  
 That of her pite kepte him from his bane.  
 At shorte wordes, right so Demophon  
 The same wey, the same path hath gon  
 That dide his false fader Theseus,  
 For unto Phyllis hath he sworn thus,  
 To wedden her, and her his trouthe plighte,  
 And piked of her al the good he mighte,  
 Whan he was hool and sound and hadde his reste;  
 And doth with Phillis what so that him leste.  
 And wel coude I, yif that me leste so,  
 Tellen al his doing to and fro.

Phyllis, then, at any rate, neglected the wedding ceremony. Little oversights like this are vastly more painful in the biographies of *good* women than elsewhere, and it is not to be wondered at that Chaucer, remembering Cupid's leave to condense, consumes no less than eighteen lines (that he should have used so much of his valuable space in this way shows the *depth* of his regret) in informing us that he is hastening over this part of the story and that certain details—with which the reader of Ovid is familiar—are omitted. Demophoön, the villain, who inherited his evil ways from Theseus, is in Chaucer's eyes beneath contempt; the poet disdains to spend upon him "a penne ful of inke," and petitions the devil to set on fire both his soul and his father's. Of the last letter of Phyllis to Demophoön, Chaucer gives us samples. Among the many virtues of Phyllis literary talent was probably not one. Indeed her

epistolary style seems to have been both verbose and uneven, as is indicated by Chaucer's observation:

But al her lettre wryten I ne may (120)  
 By ordre, for hit were to me a charge;  
 Her lettre was right long and ther-to large;  
 But here and there in ryme I have it laid,  
 Ther as me thoughte that she wel hath said.

Perhaps this incapacity for expression, instead of some of the other reasons that have been suggested, explains why Chaucer has omitted or cut short so many of these last letters in the *Legend*. And yet—one makes bold to ask—is he justified? Surely facility in writing is no index of character.

Phyllis, we hear, "was her owne deeth right with a corde," and the author ends the legend with his usual practical application, this time, however, putting in a claim for himself as an exception to the general run of men:

Be war, ye women, of your sotil fo, (166)  
 Sin yit this day men may ensample see;  
 And trusteth, as in love, no man but me.

#### HYPERMNESTRA.

Of all Chaucer's good women Hypermnestra seems entitled to the crown of virtue. Her virtue consisted pre-eminently in this fact: that she had an opportunity to kill her husband and didn't. Indeed, even to say this, is to give her a niggard's praise—for her father had threatened her with death if she failed to do away with her husband. Here then we have a heroine who, in her spirit of self-sacrifice, towers even above the other noble women of the *Legend*. It seems, therefore, a little small-spirited in Chaucer—especially when there appears to be no warrant for it in his sources—to take from Hypermnestra the credit for her action by declaring that she was so made by Fate that, whether she would or no, certain virtues were hers, and that she was so shaped by Destiny that "she dar nat handle a knyf in malice." But the poet may well have meant nothing

by this. At any rate, his description of Hypermnestra, when, waxing "cold as any frost" at the thought of the awful deed, she hesitates in the night, is perhaps the most effective picture in any of the legends, the line,

And husht were alle in Argon that citee (121)

being especially magical, an improvement, one is inclined to think, even on Ovid's

Securumque quies alta per Argos erat. (34)

And he shows the truest instinct in omitting that part of the description in the *Heroïdes* which brings Hypermnestra to the very verge of murder.<sup>1</sup> It is masterfully handled. We cannot but be slightly irritated with the poet, therefore, for permitting his heroine in the very midst of this tragic, almost sublime, scene to break in with the remark, "What the devil have I to do with the knife?"<sup>2</sup>—an exclamation, it need hardly be pointed out, pitched far below the tragic level. (Possibly Matthew Arnold had this line in mind when he observed that Chaucer does not have "high seriousness," does not write in the "grand style.") But both Chaucer and his heroine, we are happy to record, quickly recover themselves. Nothing could show more clearly that emotion has not yet wholly unbalanced Hypermnestra than the unerring accuracy with which she foresees the nexus of cause and effect in the wonderful lines:

And shal I have my throte corve a-two? (134)

Then shal I blede, alas!—

lines which do hardly more credit to Hypermnestra's coolness of mind than to Chaucer's marvelous powers of observation. The heroine awakens her husband and he jumps out the window

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<sup>1</sup> Erigor et capio tela tremante manu;  
Non ego falsa loquar: ter acutum sustulit ensem,  
Ter male sublato reccidit ense manus;  
Admovi iugulo, (sine me tibi vera fateri!)  
Admovi iugulo tela paterna tuo,  
Sed timor et pietas crudelibus obstitit ausis. (xiv, 44.)

<sup>2</sup> What devil have I with the knyf to do?— (133)  
Ovid is much wiser in leaving out the devil entirely and simply remarking: *Quid mihi cum ferro?*



and escapes. She follows, but being unable to keep up, sits down in despair, is captured, and put in prison. Then comes the line,

This tale is seid for this conclusioun, (162)

and with it the story and the *Legend* end.

The discussion of the separate legends is now concluded. I recognized at the beginning (since I myself firmly believe that the *Legend* is a satire) the danger of distorting the facts to meet my own conception; and I promised, therefore, to proceed cautiously, to assume that the legends were perfectly serious, and to attempt to explain away any seeming departures from a solemn method of treatment. For the sake of absolute candor, I chose to waive that safe rule of Chaucerian criticism:—when-ever the poet's language arouses the suspicion that it is humorously intended, always assume that the suspicion is well grounded. Having kept my promise, then, I am now free to say that, whatever may be thought of this or that questionable line or passage—and for all of these I have tried to offer satisfactory explanations—taken as a whole these lines and passages seem to me to afford overwhelming proof that Chaucer deliberately planned his legends as a mere travesty on feminine virtue.

In the light of this book of tragedies, one of Alceste's remarks in the Prologue seems to take on something of that Delphic ambiguity for which Chaucer shows so strong a predilection. The Queen of Love is telling Cupid that if Chaucer is spared now, he will never be guilty again,

But he shal maken, as ye wil devyse,  
Of wommen trewe in lovinge al hir lyve,  
Wher-so ye wil, of maiden or of wyve,  
And forthren yow, *as muche as he misseyde*  
Or in the Rose or elles in Creseyde.

It has already been shown that, in the case of both the *Rose* and the *Troilus*, the amount by which Chaucer has "misseyd" is in reality a minus quantity. When Alceste, therefore, declares that in his *Legend* Chaucer will help the cause of love to the same

extent to which in these former works he hindered it—she is building the truth far better than she knows. Once more I ask: is the presence in the Prologue of this nicely two-edged utterance to be attributed to chance? If so, we shall soon be forced to the conclusion that Chance had a peculiar grudge against Chaucer.

There was at least one reader of Chaucer's poem—a man born not many years before it was written—who evidently, from the beginning, regarded it, in one respect at least, as a satire. Lydgate, referring to Chaucer and the *Legend*, declared:

This poete wrote, at the request of the quene,  
A Legende of perfite holynesse,  
Of Good Women, to fynd out nynetene  
That did excell in bounte and fayrenes;  
But for his labour and besinesse  
Was importable, his wittes to encombre,  
In all this world to fynd so gret a nombre.

This one stanza seems to me without exception (outside Chaucer himself) the best bit of criticism on the *Legend of Good Women* which I have ever seen. So good is it, indeed, that I cannot help wondering whether it was not, in modern journalistic parlance, "officially inspired." At any rate, wherever it came from, and whether or not its author recognized its full significance, it is absolutely sound, and among all the excellent jests connected with the *Legend*, none certainly surpasses in deliciousness the fact that after telling the tales of less than a dozen good women it comes to an abrupt conclusion; and the deliciousness of the jest is immensely enhanced when we remember Alceste's grave command:

Thou shalt, whyl that thou livest, yeer by yere (481)  
The moste party of thy tyme spende  
In making of a glorious Legende  
Of Gode Wommen,

etc. Evidently Alceste had no fears lest the poet run out of subjects! Let us hope, then, that we have heard for the last time that the *Legend of Good Women* is an unfinished work.

By a stroke of humorous and dramatic genius Chaucer has rendered this seeming fragment of a poem complete, complete in a sense in which it never could have been, had other legends actually been written;<sup>1</sup> and he seems himself to hint as much in the last line of the *Legend*:

<sup>1</sup> It is worthy of note that Chaucer has done this same thing in at least two other cases. Both *Sir Thopas* and the *Monk's Tale* are, when considered by themselves (just as are the legends considered without the *Prologue*), unfinished, but as parts of the *Canterbury Tales* they are dramatically complete. Chaucer makes use of his book of tragedies in a masterful fashion. After the poet's own moral tale of *Melibeus* (which, once more, *dramatically considered*, is one of the hugest jests Chaucer ever perpetrated), the Host turns to the monk, from whom he evidently expects a sprightly tale to serve as a contrast to the one just delivered—for the Monk, we remember, is one who

leet olde thinges pace, (pro. C. T., 175.)

And held after the newe world the space.

But Harry Bailly is doomed to disappointment. The Monk, who "took al in pacience," whether because he himself possessed a Chaucerian sense of humor, or, more likely, because he did not wish to tell a tale, sets out with the most deliberate malice to bore his audience:

I wol doon al my diligence, (M. ProL., 78)

As fer as souneth in-to honestee,  
To telle yow a tale, or two, or three.  
And if yow list to herkne hiderward,  
I wol yow seyn the lyf of seint Edward;  
Or elles first Tragedies wol I telle  
Of whiche I have an hundred in my celle.

He will, he says, tell a tale or two or three, *and* he will narrate the life of St. Edward (long and dry!), or else *first* (blest be the Knight for interrupting!) he will favor the company with a little matter of a hundred tragedies. Doubtless the Monk was exasperated because the interruption came no sooner than it did, and when the Host begs for a story of hunting, the Monk, who has fulfilled his "forward" and so accomplished his purpose, refuses to try again.

In this same connection it should be said that while the *Canterbury Tales* are plainly incomplete, it is nevertheless foolish to talk about Chaucer's stupidity in undertaking so huge a task. The fact that the Host planned to have all the pilgrims tell four tales apiece, is no proof that they would have ever told them, much less is it a proof that Chaucer ever intended to compose so many. It is part of the realism to have the undertaking larger than the execution, and even though Chaucer had had fifty years at his disposal, he was under no artistic or dramatic obligation to carry out in detail Harry Bailly's original scheme.

This tale is seid for this conclusioun (!)—

Shall we admit the suspiciously significant character of this as a *last* line, or—shall we believe that Chance has been playing more pranks with Chaucer?

This matter of the supposed “unfinished” nature of the *Legend* long ago suggested the question: what stories has Chaucer omitted from his work? This same inquiry, even though we deem the poem complete, remains, in a slightly different sense, entirely pertinent, and we cannot fail to admit, upon reflection, that singular (*eigenthümlich*) as are the heroines whom the poet selects, those whom he omits form no less strange a list. Why, if the *Legend* is a perfectly serious affair, did the author choose to write of Cleopatra but neglect the account of Penelope? Why did he give the tale of Dido but leave out the story of Alceste?

And gladlier I wol wryten, if yow leste, (*Tr. v.*, 1777.)  
Penelopeës trouthe and good Alceste.

The record of Penelope is in Chaucer's main source, the *Heroïdes*. How peculiar that he should have passed over her and Laodamia to write of Phyllis and Medea! Indeed, even heroines like Oenone and Hero seem much better suited to his purpose than most of those he has chosen,<sup>1</sup> to say nothing of women naturally not included in Ovid's list, like Andromache and Hecuba. It is the omission of Alceste, however, that is fullest of significance. “But the poem is unfinished,” comes the objection, “and the story of Alceste was to be the last of the legends.” Suppose, for the sake of argument, that that were so. Still, when Chaucer began to tire with the monotony of his subjects, when he began to be “agroted” to “wryte of hem that been in love forsworn,” is it not a little peculiar, especially since he was under no obligation to write his legends

<sup>1</sup> This matter of the omissions of the *Legend* might be put in another way. If Chaucer really wished to sing the praises of woman, why did he not compose a story of Constance or Griselda? A single stanza from the most pathetic parts of the *Clerk's Tale* would be worth this whole collection of legends for that purpose.

*seriatim*, that, letting some of the others go, he did not write the story of Alceste? Surely that tale is an infinitely better illustration of womanly love and devotion than any one of those which he has told, and around its theme his imagination had apparently long played. It is well-nigh incredible that he should have omitted it even from an unfinished *Legend*. And the matter becomes even more incredible, if, still considering the poem a serious production, we adopt the popular notion that it is dedicated to Queen Anne and that the Queen is allegorically represented by Alceste. It might be thought, in itself, sufficiently ungracious to dedicate an unfinished poem to the Queen. (The difference in the case of the *Faerie Queene* is palpable.) What, then, shall be said of a poem of this nature which records the good deeds of other women but does not tell at all the crowning story of the very one to whom it is dedicated? To account for the omission, whether the poem is allegorical or not, some positive motive, such as the satirical one here alleged, must be adduced.

The much-debated question of the allegory of the *Legend* and of its possible reference to Queen Anne is one into which, up to this point, I have refused to enter. Though the suggestion that Alceste represents Anne is a decidedly plausible one, the whole matter, after all, is mainly in the realm of conjecture, and since I have desired to rest my contentions on facts rather than upon guesses, I have omitted it, realizing that the argument for the satiric nature of the *Legend* neither stands nor falls with the question of allegory. Wishing it plainly understood, then, in advance, that what I have to say on this point in no way affects the previous argument, I would like, nevertheless, to offer, hypothetically, one or two observations on the matter.

In the first place we have Lydgate's categorical statement that Chaucer wrote the poem "at the request of the Queen." Why this statement has been so discounted, I do not know. Even though Lydgate be deemed untrustworthy, ought not a statement of fact from him to be worth nearly as much as the mere conjectures of twentieth-century critics? Now if it were act-

ually true that Chaucer was *requested* to write this poem, we have at once, in addition to the natural bent of his mind, a new motive for the humorous treatment of the theme. Any real poet prefers to choose the occasions for the exercise of his poetic powers. The muse is not, so to speak, perpetually on tap. And in the whole range of English literature it would be hard to select a poet whom, we might well imagine, it would have more irked than Chaucer—in spite of his undeniable capacity for occasional verse—to have a poetical task arbitrarily assigned him. What could be more like him, under such circumstances, than to make sport of his “requester”?<sup>1</sup> But to make sport of royalty is dangerous—albeit for that reason all the more attractive—business. Well may Chaucer have smacked his lips at the prospect and sharpened even more than usual the tools of his subtle humor! Well may he have been discontented with the first draft of his prologue, and increasing the fun tenfold in a revision, have increased at the same time, by a peerless stroke of genius, the improbability of its being discovered!—for he was precisely the sort of man, I conceive, to write humorous poems content with the thought (if I may adapt a line from the *Troilus*) that

God and Chaucer wiste al what this mente,  
or, to use the Wife of Bath's words (for this was a favorite conception of the poet's):

There was no wight, save god and he, that wiste.

But now on the other hand—leaving this matter of pleasant conjecture—if the *Legend* be really a serious poem and Alceste still represent the Queen, then there are certain passages in the Prologue which offer rather perplexing difficulties, passages which, however, with the humorous interpretation, only add to the jocoseness and the satire.

As the first instance of what I mention, I wish to place together two short selections from the B Prologue—separated in

<sup>1</sup> It has already been seen what he did in the case of another occasional poem, *The Parlement of Foules*.

the text by about a dozen lines—trusting to the juxtaposition to bring out a “curious” fact. Alceste says to Chaucer:

Thou shalt, whyl that thou livest, yeer by yere, (481)  
 The moste party of thy tyme spende  
 In making of a glorious Legende  
 Of Gode Wommen, maidenés and wyves,  
 And whan this book is maad, yive hit the quene (496)  
 On my behalfe, at Eltham, or at Shene.

As long as you live, Alceste says to the poet, continue to write on this book, and when it is done give it to the Queen. Without further comment this trifling inconsistency may be recommended to the attention of those interested in the question of the relation of the *Legend* to Queen Anne; and if some critic astute enough to explain it as another of Chaucer’s blunders chances to come forward, he may be assured in advance that his explanation will be quite consistent with the text of a poem already copiously sprinkled with lapses of this sort.

But to take a second example. The opening passage of the Prologue, in both versions, even though one allege no satirical purpose, produces, actually, an effect on the mind just the opposite of what it purports to produce. It is ostensibly a statement of absolute belief in authority throughout those realms where experience fails—a belief, for example, in the existence of hell or heaven. But in reality the passage has a skeptical tendency, and Professor Lounsbury is quite right, I think, in laying stress on it as evidence of the questioning character of Chaucer’s mind. How has the poet accomplished this paradoxical effect? Largely by two lines. That inexorably straight-forward, common-sense couplet,

ther nis noon dwelling in this contree  
 That either hath in heven or helle y-be,  
 quite overtops all that follows and obliterates its impression. Now is it not rather unkind in Chaucer, especially since this introduction is entirely unnecessary, to place this suggestion of the possible non-existence of hell in the very fore-front of a poem whose heroine is none other than Alceste, the woman who

chose to die and go to hell for her husband? If the work is a serious one, this certainly is an egregious blunder, as is also the "peculiar" couplet, toward the end of the Prologue,

But er I go, this mucche I wol thee telle, (552)

Ne shal no trewe lover come in helle,

and these lapses become vastly worse if the poem really refers to Queen Anne. But if the poem is a satire, whether allegorical or not, all of these things are exquisite jests, and, if it be allegorical, the most exquisite jest of all is the implication that King Richard (an excellent candidate for the role of Admetus) stands in need of being saved from hell—a hit, eminently just, and pre-eminently Chaucerian.<sup>1</sup>

Finally, brief comment is demanded on two other theories in regard to the Prologue: the theory, in the first place, that the poet revised it (from B to A) when his own relations with the court were strained, and deliberately went through his earlier work cutting out its compliments to the Queen. Geoffrey Chaucer do that! Let him who has entertained such an idea for the fraction of a second read the works of Geoffrey Chaucer! Only a few degrees less unthinkable than this is the theory that the poet, out of tender regard for Richard's sentimentality, cut out, after her death, the allusions to Richard's queen. Why, one feels constrained to ask, if it so pained the King to recall his lost days of happiness (for it is to be noted that much more than the mere reference to 'Shene' is omitted), did not the obedient and considerate poet "publish" an expurgated *Parlement of Foules*? In reply to this, possibly some critic may suggest (may he pardon me this theft of his critical thun-

<sup>1</sup> Chaucer need not have had the slightest fear that Richard would see the joke, for, if we may trust history and Shakespeare, few men have been more completely lacking in the sense of humor. If, on the other hand, the poem is a serious one, then certain features of the Alceste story (as Dr. Lowes, following Professor Kittredge's suggestion, says—*P. M. L. A.*, *xix*, 671, *n.* 4) do become an argument against the theory that Alceste represents the Queen, for Chaucer, recognizing the ungraciousness of these features, could hardly have failed to exclude them, even though he felt perfectly certain that the King would not be keen enough to see the point.



der!) that such a revision probably *was* written, but has, owing to the carelessness of the scribes, been lost.

A word or two may next be said concerning the suggestion, made by Dr. Lowes, that the separate legends were perhaps written before the Prologue. While personally I cannot admit the validity of the reasoning by which he supports his theory nor of the conclusions he draws from it,<sup>1</sup> I think the theory it-

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Lowes, after making the suggestion that the separate legends may have been composed before the Prologue, goes on to show how his theory involves important results for the chronology of Chaucer's writings. He brings forward three principal arguments in favor of his theory:

(1) That certain passages in the *Ariadne* are similar to others in the *Knight's Tale*, and that both are plainly based on the *Teseide* of Boccaccio—the clear inference being, since the passages in the *Knight's Tale* are much superior poetically, that the *Ariadne* must have been written before the *Knight's Tale*;

(2) That the legends are poetically inferior to the Prologue;

(3) That since the *Phyllis* is closely associated with the *Ariadne*, and since the former was one of the last legends composed (as is shown by the lines,

But for I am agroted heer-biforn (61)  
To wryte of hem that been in love forsworn,  
And eek to haste me in my legende,  
Which to performe god me grace sende,

etc.), practically all the legends must be of early date.

Now it will be perceived at once that, if the satirical interpretation of the poem be allowed, confusion is at once introduced into this carefully constructed train of arguments—to say nothing of the inferences based upon it. Since, too, there are other objections to be brought against these arguments even on their own basis, a word or two may be said concerning each.

To begin with, Dr. Lowes' first contention entirely overlooks the possibility that the superiority of these particular passages in the *Knight's Tale* may be due to Chaucer's mature touch when he revised it. In the next place, the fact that Theseus says he has been Ariadne's servant *seven* years, while the period of Palamon's imprisonment is also *seven* years—this is certainly a thread of association so slender that its serious use by Dr. Lowes suggests that his case is, after all, not quite so "conclusive" as he would have us believe. But the question of conclusiveness aside, let us see whither the argument of Dr. Lowes leads. "If the *Ariadne* followed the *Knight's Tale*," he declares, "what we have is a decidedly inferior and rather sketchy replica of two motives already fully and artistically worked out. That is, to say

self, on entirely different grounds, quite worth considering; in fact, even prior to reading Dr. Lowes' article, the notion had occurred to me that parts of these stories may have been composed before the Prologue, antedating, in that case, the very conception of the *Legend*. Indeed, to suppose that this was the case would, in one respect, add immensely to the facetiousness of the poem. What aspect of the whole jest would be more ludicrous than the supposition that Chaucer, commanded to write of love in penance for the misdeeds of his early literary life, fished out some of the products of that very life and palmed

the least, inherently improbable. More specifically, while the substitution of the 'foreyne' of the *Legend* for the lovely picture of the garden in Boccaccio is on any theory puzzling enough (though as the crude working out of a suggestion from a story not yet made the poet's own, it is at least intelligible), the view that just that substitution of all others should be deliberately made for Chaucer's own exquisite rendering of the picture in the *Knight's Tale* is almost inconceivable. And finally, that after he had created the very noble and stately figure of Theseus in the *Knight's Tale* Chaucer should, once more deliberately, superimpose upon it in his reader's minds the despicable traitor of the *Legend of Ariadne* ["The devil him quyte his whyle!"], only the most convincing external evidence could lead one to believe." (P. 809.) I have no *external* evidence to offer; but merely grant that the poem is satirical and both this puzzling substitution and this atrocious superimposition are plain as daylight. What would a man like Chaucer enjoy better than parodying his own poetry? It may be pure imagination on my part, but nevertheless I cannot escape the feeling that there is a distinct flavor of the mock-romantic in that picture of Ariadne and Phedra

as they stode on the wal  
And lokeden upon the brighte moon;  
Hem leste nat to go to bedde soon.

In other words—and this brings us to Dr. Lowes' second point—if the poem be a satire, we have a *positive* motive for the inferiority of the legends; the more tedious and less life-like they are, the huger the joke on Cupid and Alceste, who have commanded Chaucer to write a "glorious *Legende*."

Concerning Dr. Lowes' deductions from the passage in the *Phyllis* several things may be said. If, on his basis, we accept a theory of the early composition of the legends and insist also on their marked inferiority to the Prologue, the only tenable hypothesis will be, it is clear, that they were composed quite independent of and prior to the very conception of the *Prologue*, Dr. Lowes himself speaking in one place

them off for penance? It is as if a minister—Chaucer surely would not resent the comparison, and this same minister has already been turned to good account for purposes of illustration—it is as if a minister who has recently assumed a new pastorate and who labors to keep abreast of the times, burning the midnight oil in the preparation of his discourses, were to be waited on by a committee of his rural but cultured congregation, who submit to him a suspicion they have conceived: that

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(862, note 1) of the poet's "later return to the *Legends*.....when the Prologue was conceived." And even if we imagine that one or two stories were added at that time to the earlier collection, the additions could not have included, on Dr. Lowes' theory, either the *Ariadne* or the *Phyllis*. But the word *legend* (used in the singular number and in such a way as plainly to imply the conception of the Prologue—cf. *Phyllis*, 62, and *B Prologue*, 486) occurs in the passage under discussion in the *Phyllis*! Hence Dr. Lowes must give up his original contention or fall back on the theory that the passage is a later interpolation—a possibility which does not seem to have occurred to him, and which, upon examination, proves rather disconcerting to his line of thought, for the view that the *Phyllis* was one of the last legends composed is a necessary link in his intricate argument. If the passage be an interpolation, Chaucer would naturally have inserted it in one of the legends *near the end of* his poem. But one of the legends near the end of his poem would not necessarily be one of those last composed. In fact, throughout his argument about these lines in the *Phyllis*, has not Dr. Lowes been guilty of that same "strangely literal-minded" sort of interpretation against which he protests so strongly in the paragraph of his article where he speaks of the high "imaginative power" with which "Chaucer—whatever must be said of his interpreters—was endowed"? When Chaucer declares that he is tired of writing on his *Legend*, his critic proceeds to take him at his word—though it is to be observed that, on Dr. Lowes' own theory, the poet's weariness did not prevent his writing a very sprightly and charming Prologue *after* he had finished the *Phyllis*. But why linger further over a passage whose significance, on the basis that the poem is a satire, is so plain?

In spite of all that has just been said, the possibility (discussed in the text) still remains that Chaucer *did* utilize in his *Legend* earlier work of a serious but tedious nature, turning it now to ironical purposes. At any rate I think Dr. Lowes' feeling that the legends are poetically inferior to the Prologue is worth much more than the complex structure of hypothesis and inference built up so elaborately in this portion of his paper.

In the second part of the article on Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*, by H. C. Goddard, in the last number of the journal (Vol. VIII, No. 1) a passage of a little over a page has unfortunately been misplaced. Page 107 and the first eight lines of page 108 should follow the couplet three lines from the bottom of page 103. A correct reprint of the whole signature is furnished the subscribers with this number of the journal, which will enable them to correct the mistake when they have the complete volume bound.

Page 70, two lines from the top, for *prasing* read *phrasing*.

Page 77, eight lines from the bottom, for *mal* read *mala*.

Page 87, eight lines from the top, for *may* read *many*.

Page 88, line eleven of footnote, for *pro.* read *Pro.*

he has inverted his barrel of sermons and is offering them the ancient offspring of his mind. The minister, instead of angrily protesting against the injustice of the charge, makes no answer, but, seeming by his silence to admit his guilt, promises to do differently in the future. When finally he is again alone—and the darkness has begun to fall—he goes to his dusty barrel, and with the faint trace of a smile at the corners of his mouth, brings forth the most time-eaten remains of his divinity-school imbecility. These, week by week, he serves up to his delighted congregation, who, aware of the change of fare and perceiving the increased profundity of the thought, shower him with congratulations—members of the committee that formerly waited upon him even going so far as to suggest, in a paternal way, that they had forseen at the time the effect of their advice. The minister, accepting these compliments with grace, continues “yeer by yere” to draw from the same reservoirs of his youth, and finally goes from that pastorate—and later to the grave—his secret untold.

Now whether Chaucer, in his *Legend*, has done something comparable to this is a matter mainly of conjecture, and, as such, I do not care to dwell on it further except to remark that if he *has* done it (as the present discussion of the legends serves to show), he has added to and altered, at least slightly, his original versions of the tales. Not a few passages may actually be pointed out which seem exceedingly like satirical interpolations in previously serious (but tedious) matter, this being especially true of the concluding lines of nearly all the legends. To have utilized old work, written originally in a sober vein, would have aided Chaucer in not permitting his satire to get beyond bounds, and this fact may help account for the marvelous self-restraint (marvelous even for Chaucer<sup>1</sup>) which characterizes the poem. A less self-restrained humorist,

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<sup>1</sup>Whose golden rule of composition, in this respect, is the advice of Pandarus to Cressid (when teaching her how to write love-letters):

And if thou wryte a goodly word al softe,                   (ii, 1028)  
Though it be good, reherce it not to ofte.

wishing to write a satirical Legend of Good Women, would have chosen such heroines as Dalila or Clytemnestra. Swift could have written such a Legend with magnificent irony. But Chaucer is not Swift, and he belongs, not to the cannonball, but to the sugar-coated pill, school of satirists.

There is another conclusion of Dr. Lowes' with which (this time with more certainty) I have from the first been in agreement, though here again, I am forced to say, the reasoning by which he supports it seems to me fallacious. I believe with Dr. Lowes that the reference, at the end of the *Troilus*, to the "comédie" that Chaucer has in view is a reference, not to the *House of Fame*, but to the *Legend of Good Women*. Long before I approached the matter from this point of view, I wondered how Chaucer could have written the *House of Fame* after the *Troilus*. Excellent a poem as the *House of Fame* may be in certain respects, it is surely a temperate statement to affirm that it is as far beneath the *Troilus* both in artistic merit and in its grasp of life as *Love's Labour's Lost* is beneath *Hamlet*. The *House of Fame*, in spite of its delightful humor and in spite of the presence of that irony which characterizes Chaucer's latest art, is a mediaeval poem. The *Troilus*, in spite of its subject, is a modern poem, in some respects vastly nearer the temper of our own time than is many an Elizabethan play. Of course this does not prove that the *House of Fame* was written, much less does it prove that it was "published," before the *Troilus*; but it does demand a stronger argument than one based on more or less far-fetched analogies between the *House of Fame* and the *Divine Comedy* to overthrow the natural pre-supposition of a later date for the *Troilus*. But now I ask, how can Dr. Lowes, on his own theory of Chaucer's serious treatment of good women, believe that the allusion at the end of the *Troilus* is to the *Legend*? In order to believe it he is compelled (1) to assume that Chaucer, owing partly perhaps to "scarsitee" of rhymes for *tregedie*, uses the word *comédie* in a very general sense, intending to express by it merely his desire "for a complete change of theme;" and (2) he is obliged to

make the further very arbitrary assumption<sup>1</sup> that in referring to his future work the poet has in mind only its Prologue—a tacit admission on Dr. Lowes' part that, as he interprets the poem, the Prologue and the rest of the *Legend* are lacking in unity of spirit.<sup>2</sup> With the first of these assumptions I have no particular quarrel. If, however, Chaucer was really seeking "a complete change of theme," I fail to see how even the Prologue, taken as a solemn production, forms such a striking contrast—at least, a contrast of the kind suggested—with the poem which contains the character of Pandarus; while if, as is much more natural to imagine, the poet is referring to the whole *Legend*, then his method of seeking relief from the tragic tale of Troilus becomes the still stranger one of turning to these narratives of villainous men, to this book of love stories all of which end in death and most of them in suicide. But, on the other hand, merely adopt the satirical interpretation and the whole thing is perfectly plain. A desire on Chaucer's part to lay aside the *Troilus*, which he had treated with the maturest art, that he might hasten to such mediaeval themes as those of the *House of Fame* (which he never completed!) or of a serious *Legend* (which, again, he never completed!) is well nigh incredible. A desire, on the contrary, to hasten from the *Troilus* to the perpetration of a joke the like of which we shall seek in vain in the annals of literature—that desire in anyone with a taste for the jocular would be explicable enough, while in Chaucer it is really infinitely natural. In the reference, then, at the end of the *Troilus*, we seem to have Chaucer's own word that the present interpretation of the *Legend* is the right one, that this collection of tragic love stories is, at bottom, anything but tragic.

In connection with this probable prospective reference to the *Legend* in the *Troilus*, may be placed the unquestionable

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<sup>1</sup>It is worth noting that the single legend of Dido is four-fifths as long as the longer Prologue.

<sup>2</sup>This lack of unity is, in itself, an overwhelming argument against the current interpretation of the poem.

retrospective reference in the Man of Law's headlink. Says the Man of Law:

I can right now no thrifty tale seyn, (46)  
 But Chaucer, though he can but lewedly  
 On metres and on ryming craftily,  
 Hath seyde hem in swich English as he can  
 Of olde tyme, as knoweth many a man.  
 And if he have not seyde hem, leve brother,  
 In o book, he hath seyde hem in another.

.....  
 Who-so that wol his large volume seke  
 Cleped the Seintes Legende of Cupyde,  
 Ther may he seen the large woundes wyde  
 Of Lucresse, and of Babilan Tisbee;

etc. "Why," it has been asked, "does he call the rather slender collection of tales a large volume?" To this the rather obvious answer is: he calls it a large volume precisely because it is a slender volume.<sup>1</sup> What could be more delicious than to refer

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<sup>1</sup>This simple rule of Chaucerian criticism may be offered, applicable to the poet's later works, and, like the innocence of an accused man before the law, to be taken for granted and adhered to till positive evidence to the contrary is adduced: Always assume that Chaucer means the opposite of what he seems to say. In the case under consideration the irony is, of course, unconscious on the part of the speaker. The situation, it will be noted, is a dramatic one, for the Man of Law, plainly unaware that Chaucer is one of his fellow pilgrims, has made a rather disparaging reference to the latter's poetic endowment:

But Chaucer, though he can but lewedly  
 On metres and on ryming craftily,

etc. We have already seen how Alceste was rewarded for a strikingly similar observation in the *Legend*:

Al be hit that he can nat wel endyte,  
 and we naturally tremble for the Man of Law. Nor are our fears unfounded, for the poet's vengeance is swift. The lawyer's learning proves his nemesis. He enters upon a description of the *Legend of Good Women*—the *Seintes Legende of Cupyde*, as he calls it!—which, as is soon evident, is based far less on an intimate acquaintance with the poem itself than on the speaker's store of encyclopedic information. With the true legal instinct for ancient precedent, for instance, he says, among other things, that Chaucer tells of

The crueltee of thee, queen Medea,



to this tiny pamphlet in which is written an exhaustive account of the goodness of the women of the world—what could be more delicious than to refer to this as if it were a tome which a yoke of oxen would be needed to transport, and to the stories which compose it, as if

Men mighte make of hem a bible

Twenty foot thikke, as I trowe.

Dr. French speaks of the allusion to the *Legend* by the Man of Law as “admittedly inexact, both in naming the book and in describing its bulk.”<sup>1</sup> Assuredly, as the same writer remarks in another connection, Chaucer “is never half so serious as his critics.”

But this discussion has already reached an undreamt-of length, and I must hasten to conclude, denying myself reference to a large number of the shorter passages of the poem, especially of the two Prologues, which corroborate my contentions.<sup>2</sup>

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Thy litel children hanging by the hals

For thy Jason, that was of love so fals,

wholly unaware that the poet has exercised his privilege (quite incomprehensible, doubtless, to a member of the legal profession) of setting tradition aside and relating the story as best suits his purpose. The sad fact must be recorded that there was a strain of pedantry in the Sergeant of the Lawe, and pedants being at all times proper prey for poets, Chaucer does not resist the temptation to give his fellow pilgrim a few thrusts.

Ther coude no wight pinche at his wryting;

And every statut coude he pleyn by rote.

Statutes, however, are not poems, and the Man of Law would have done well to keep out of the realm of literary criticism (which proceedeth not “by rote”). As a gravely legal account of a humorous masterpiece the lawyer’s description of the *Legend* may be pronounced a distinct success.

<sup>1</sup>*Op. cit.*, 31.

<sup>2</sup>Three or four of these only may be briefly dismissed in a footnote:

(1) Which is more likely (in a poem in which Chaucer is giving a supreme example of his own power to “endyte”) ?—that the poet should cause Alceste to say of him:

But wel I wot, with that he can endyte,

(A 402)

or

If even a small part of what has been said concerning the satirical nature of the *Legend of Good Women* be deemed true, it is at once evident that Chaucer has come very far from really following his supposed French models. Why, then, does he express his indebtedness so profusely? He apologizes to his predecessors, in my opinion, precisely because he owes so little to them. What he has already done in the *Troilus* he repeats

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Al be hit that he can nat wel endyte. (B 414)

To suppose the change of the latter to the former, is, for aught that I can see, to suppose nothing more nor less than the obliteration of Chaucer's sense of humor. (Compare the poet's likening of himself, through Alceste, to a fly which the lion whisks courteously away with his tail.)

(2) Without going into the matter here, I may say that the argument which Dr. Lowes (p. 677) constructs around the word "florouns" seems to me, partly owing to the very specificalness of the term, to point in just the opposite direction from that in which it evidently points for Dr. Lowes.

(3) Dr. Lowes calls attention (p. 675) to the line (in A) in the description of Cupid where Chaucer says his face shone so bright that

A furlong-wey I mighte him nat beholde, (165)

and notes the comparatively commonplace line of B:

That wel unnethes mighte I him beholde. (233)

Once more, when we consider simply the two lines themselves, A is assuredly the better and the change would seem to be either from B to A or—inexplicable. But consider the context, especially the lines immediately following and most especially the couplet (common to both versions):

For sternely on me he gan biholde,  
So that his loking doth myn herte colde.

Assuredly if Chaucer could not look at Cupid, for the blaze of his glory, at a furlong's distance (for "furlong-wey" is plainly *spatial* here), his ability to gaze at him nearby, apparently undazzled, seems rather peculiar.

(4) Dr. Lowes (p. 682) has the following comment: "It is scarcely superfluous to note, perhaps, that the reference to the 'observaunces' of the birds in B. 152—'Construeth that as yow list, I do no cure'—which to say the least is unnecessary, does not occur in A., although the rhyme-syllable is unchanged." Now I should say, on the other hand, that the substitution of the line (as Skeat restores it):

So ech of hem [doth wel] to creature, (138)

for a line which is, as far as words can be, the very embodiment of a wink, is incredible.

even more humorously in the *Legend*. In the former poem he professes to be following his authority with abject servility, when, as a matter of fact, he is creating a unique work. Quite so in the *Legend*. He does, to be sure, employ existing scaffolding, but his employment of it serves only to call attention to the complete difference between his own style of architecture and that of the French romancers, between the purpose of his building and that of theirs. Nor do I need to rest my opinion concerning this point on the character of the *Legend*, adequate as such a basis is. Chaucer has virtually explained the whole matter himself, and if, as has been suggested,<sup>1</sup> he sent his poem to Deschamps in return for manuscripts sent from France to him, he must have chuckled at the audacity of what he had done. If a writer today, at the beginning of a work, were to express his profound indebtedness to Mr. George Bernard Shaw and that work itself should turn out to be a series of passionate love songs in the Sapphic manner—we should hardly take the expression of indebtedness seriously. Yet something, at least inversely, comparable to this is what Chaucer has had the colossal audacity to do. After what appears to be a humble acknowledgment to the flower and leaf poets (though owing to the skillful management of his “ifs” and “thoughts” even this passage becomes slightly suspicious<sup>2</sup>), he comes out—I speak first of A—with the categorical statement:

For this werk is al of another tunne, (79)  
Of olde story, er swich stryf was begunne.

This is a queer way to express your literary obligations—to thank your master and then declare you are going to do something quite different from anything he ever attempted. Even

<sup>1</sup> By Professor Kittredge in *Modern Philology*, I, 6.

<sup>2</sup> “If I may finde an ere”—he does not say that he *does* find it. “Thogh it happen me rehercen eft”—he does not say that he *does* rehearse anything.

Chaucer was evidently frightened at his own boldness and in the B version moved this last statement, and the passage preceding it, some hundred lines further on, where its significance, though remaining the same, would be less likely to be noted.<sup>1</sup> This is the way the lines read in B:

But natheles, ne wene nat that I make (188)  
 In preysing of the flour agayn the leef,  
 No more than of the corn agayn the sheef:  
 For, as to me, nis lever noon ne lother;  
 I nam with-holden yit with never nother.  
 Ne I not who serveth leef, ne who the flour;  
 Wel brouken they hir service or labour;  
 For this thing is al of another tonne,  
 Of olde story, er swich thing was begonne.

Now if these lines are not an expression of good-natured contempt (for such was the complex emotion of which the rare nature of Chaucer was capable) for the trivialities of the flower and leaf controversy, what are they? Surely, once more, it is a curious (*eigenthümlich*) way of acknowledging indebtedness to the poets of that controversy to affirm utter indifference toward a matter which was to them one of the deepest concern, especially when the disciple goes so far as to say (in the line "Ne I not who serveth leef, ne who the flour") that he does not even know on which sides the partisans are arranged. And the sarcasm of

Wel brouken they hir service or labour (194)  
 is not less real because the line *could* be interpreted in another way. But most significant of all, perhaps, is the alteration in the last couplet quoted, the change of the words "werk" and "stryf" (of A) to "thing." This is the very change on which Dr. Lowes puts such emphasis in arguing the priority of B.

<sup>1</sup>There was another reason, already given, for getting rid of the passage where it stood in A. This is my double answer to Dr. Lowes' remark that the two flower and leaf paragraphs, once put together, "are seen to belong together, and it seems very difficult on any hypothesis, to assign a reason for their severance."

He declares that these changes "are as nearly conclusive as evidence can be. For, granted the careful discrimination involved in the *werk* and *stryf* of A. 79-80, what conceivable motive could there be for substituting, not for one only, but for both, the least discriminating word in the language—namely, *thing*?" This, it seems to me, involves, again, the mistake of judging isolated passages solely on their own merits, instead of in the light of the poem as a whole. In the first place, Chaucer's object is not always "careful discrimination," and what better word than the delightfully indefinite "thing" could be hit on to describe the nature of this gloriously unique production, the *Legend of Good Women*?<sup>1</sup> The reader can think of no better one today. "Werk"<sup>2</sup> is surely inappropriate enough, as Chaucer himself implies in the delicately hinted contrast between the "service and labour" of his predecessors and the "thing" which the poet himself is producing. And next, by the repetition of "thing" in the following line (for he substitutes it "not for one only, but for both"), the poet achieves one of his roguish ambiguities, of which the humor, to say nothing of the mere truth, is obvious. This, then, is the "conceivable motive" which I would offer. And such, to summarize this matter of Chaucer's expression of indebtedness, is the upshot of what Dr. Lowes calls the poet's "consummately happy" apology. However highly Chaucer may have thought of this group of French predecessors and contemporaries (and for my part I do not for a moment intend to deny such high estimate), we must

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<sup>1</sup> Chaucer, in the *Tales*, after the disastrous shipwreck of Sir Thopas, meekly informs the host that he will treat the company to "a litel thing in prose," the *Melibeus*. Since the word *litel*, as applied to this piece, is (to borrow a phrase used in another connection by Dr. French) "admittedly inexact in describing its bulk," and since, too, the word *thing*, as Dr. Lowes has pointed out, is "the least discriminating word in the language," I respectfully beg to suggest a textual emendation in accordance with which line B 2127 of the *Melibeus Prologue* shall read, in future editions of the poet:

I wol yow telle a longe tale in prose.

<sup>2</sup> The "labour" of B 71 is plainly a different case.

accept with some reservation what Dr. Lowes says when he writes: "For no more acceptable compliment—and this must never be lost sight of in thinking of the happy breed of men who vied with one another in sowing each the other's flowers in his several garden—on Chaucer's part could have been paid Deschamps and Froissart, than that of taking up their goodly words into what one of them once called his 'douce mélodie'; and nothing could be more apt, nothing more courtly, than his heightening of the compliment by graceful acknowledgment of what he had, as one now sees, gleaned after their master Machault and themselves."<sup>1</sup> Not wholly otherwise (the temptation is to think) did Chaucer glean after the authors of the metrical romances, and (with his incomparable courtliness and grace) gather up *their* goodly words into the lilting stanzas of *Sir Thopas*. Nor can it be pure fancy to suggest that he who saw so keenly the ludicrous aspect of the old romances must have been capable of finding, even in the procedure of the Courts of Love, something, occasionally, to provoke a smile.

And now do not all these things powerfully imply that the revision of the Prologue, so far from being executed when Chaucer's remembrance of the *marguerite* poems was dulled by time, was more likely the occasion for a refreshing of his memory concerning these songs in honor of the daisy? The greater the number of reminiscences of these poems in the "apology" passage, the more effective its irony; the closer the superficial and external resemblance between Chaucer's poem and its "models," the more striking the real and essential difference. Here, then, is a motive which harmonizes beautifully with the whole tenor of the *Legend*, and which, applied to Dr. Lowes' argument regarding the relative dependence of the two Prologues on their models, suddenly turns black to white, causing the evidence he has marshalled around the standard of Prologue A not merely to desert that standard, but actually to take up arms against it. Indeed, in this connection, again, the spirit of *Sir Thopas* will not down. Suppose there should come

<sup>1</sup> P. 616.

to light, at some future day, a variant version of the story of that Knyght of the "semely nose." The happy discoverer of the treasure, examining it with eager emotion, counts only half as many reminiscences of the old romances as in the current version. How easy—adopting Dr. Lowes' line of argument—to demonstrate the significance of the "find," to prove the new text a later and superior rendering! The old one, with its more frequent "echoes," is plainly closer to the sources; hence the new one must have been composed when the poet's memory of those sources was dulled by time and his eye fixed on his own work; ergo, the new version is the more Chaucerian and the later. *Quod erat demonstrandum*.

And now I may perhaps sum up my own feeling as to the originality of the *Legend of Good Women* by commenting briefly on a remark of Dr. Lowes' in that connection. "But what becomes," says Dr. Lowes, referring to his own theory of Chaucer's borrowings, "there will be those who ask [I confess myself among the askers], of the originality of the Prologue—particularly of the famous and beautiful lines in celebration of the daisy itself? . . . . . The difficulty back of such a question lies in this—that one persists in bringing modern preconceptions to a mediaeval case . . . ." Now I should have supposed that the *real* danger in this matter of the *Legend* was quite the opposite of all this, the danger, namely, of bringing mediaeval preconceptions to a modern case. True, a mediaeval writer, Chaucer, in one sense, is. We need know no more than his century to know that. But so is Machault a mediaeval writer; so is Deschamps. And Machault and Deschamps are dead names on the dead pages of literary history, while Chaucer is a living force in a still living world. Wherein consists the difference? Does it not consist precisely in this:—that Chaucer is something more than a mere "mediaeval case"; that he is, among other things, a modern case; that we *can* bring modern ideas to his poetry and they *do* apply; that we *do* gaze into those works that body forth so faithfully the fourteenth century

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<sup>1</sup> P. 658.

and see reflected there as in a glass—not darkly but with the strange light of poetic illumination—the twentieth century? Why, this—I had almost said—is the only test of great poetry, the only test of true originality! I agree, then, most heartily, with Dr. Lowes, when he goes on to say, in the passage which I rather ruthlessly interrupted: “So soon as one comes to see that for the older literature the question of the source of its material has, beside the imaginative handling of it, absolutely no ethical and only indirectly any aesthetic significance, so soon is one rewarded for the possible relinquishment of one delight by the more habitual sway of a larger and certainly truer sense of what originality really is.” Yes, this, assuredly, in any age, is the only originality; but what I fail to perceive in the *Legend of Good Women* is where, in the light of Dr. Lowes’ interpretation, the high “imaginative handling” comes in. What is there about this work which makes it so superior to these various French poems to which its many points of likeness have been shown? Surely (since they are dead) it is in its *differences from* them that we must seek its life. And if we cannot point out those differences, then to speak of it as a *great* poem is to fall into a blind and indiscriminate Chaucer-worship which is the moral death of all effective criticism. Hieronimo throws floods of light upon Hamlet; but between Hieronimo and Hamlet there opens a great gulf. Machault and Deschamps may throw floods of light upon Chaucer; but where, in this case, one must relentlessly insist on knowing, is the gulf? Was it vain paradox, then,—or was it not—to deny that the Prologue is a mere “mediaeval case”? And if one were to seek something resembling Chaucer’s treatment of his sources in the *Legend*, would one—or would one not—be forever ostracized from polite society, if one were caught turning the pages, not of Gower or of Lydgate, but of certain of the works of Fielding, Jane Austen, or of Thackeray? Indeed, as these last names suggest, one sometimes longs, in one’s wilder hours, for a new school of literary investigation. Some of the metaphysicians—applying, I suppose, the old adage about the poor rule which will not work



both ways—tell us that effects are not simply effects, but also causes; causes, not simply causes, but effects. Why not have a new method of research whose point of departure should be the belief that the sources of *great* poets should be sought in the works, not of earlier, but of later, ages than their own? Of course such a method might conceivably be pressed too far—methods usually are. But think how refreshing it would be to hear of a doctor's dissertation tracing the influence of Ben Jonson on the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, to read a brilliant little monograph on the indebtedness of Chaucer to the author of *Tristram Shandy*, or to discuss the question: Did Chaucer steal Sir Thopas from Cervantes? Why, such a method might attain the very philosopher's stone of criticism, a criterion by which to distinguish the great poets from the small! And then, too, there would never be the danger of bringing "modern preconceptions to a mediaeval case." But it is time to dismiss these beautiful dreams and to return.

Chaucer, in the *Legend of Good Women*, has produced a work whose meaning is far other and far more than that which lies upon its surface. No poet who ever wrote was more profoundly aware than he that the method of art is indirect, that the artist, if he would seek an end, must not seek it—if he would say a thing, must not say it. This is the counterpart in art of the irony of life. When the Wife of Bath declares of her first husbands,

The three men were gode, and riche, and olde,  
 she is apparently making a very plain statement of three facts. But the laws of human nature are not the laws of mathematics, and three innocent facts, placed side by side, make, oftentimes, far more than their mere arithmetical sum. That one line of Chaucer's is better than a book about him. The *Legend of Good Women* is surely evidence enough of its own ironic nature; but if it is not enough, all the other mature works of Chaucer cry out in unison that he is just the one to have written such a satire. If he did not do it—one may make bold to say—he ought to have done it.

Yet let us not leave the *Legend* without a recognition that, in spite of its humor, the poem is more than a satire. Just as behind its superficial seriousness there lurks an ironic meaning, so, in turn, behind that irony an even deeper seriousness is hidden. The opening passage of the Prologue—with its intentionally bad logic in behalf of ancient books—is the key not merely to the humorous but to the sober purport of the poem. Like the *Nun's Priest's Tale* and the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* (to mention, from many possible examples, merely two) the *Legend of Good Women* is a powerful protest against the domination of authority, a defense of experience as the only ultimately valid basis for knowledge. Across the centuries Chaucer clasps hands with John Locke and David Hume. He anticipates, without ceasing to be a poet, the temper of the eighteenth century. His, too, is the English grace of common sense. Nor is it too much to assert, perhaps, that Chaucer's doctrine carries with it a conscious implication which beautifully contradicts the irony of his own poem—the implication that had the author chosen his heroines from the life around him, the stories of their virtue would have been of a less questionable nature.

And now, of the interpretation of the *Legend* which has here been offered, I find a final, crowning confirmation. This poem is by no means the only one of Chaucer's into which he himself enters as a living figure. Among the others the *Canterbury cycle* is best known. Of the pilgrims who gathered at the Tabard Inn, more than one was endowed, in this degree or that, with power to perceive the discrepancy between things as they seem and as they are, to find reality behind hypocrisy and sham. Yet I have sometimes half suspected that there was one in that "company" who saw more keenly than the rest, whose sympathy was wider, whose smiles were more profound. And he who could read so searchingly the hearts of others—was he wholly ignorant of his own? I cannot think so. Nor can I believe that, knowing himself, he was unregardful, in choosing his own narrative, of that same dramatic propriety (subtle sometimes and sometimes obvious) with which, in the case of the other pilgrims, he so justly suited the story to the teller. I

have often gone so far as to fancy, therefore, that the humorous masterpiece of the *Canterbury Tales* is no other than that "litel thing in prose," the *Melibeus*. This, at least (as it ought to be), it is: a glorious symbol of the Chaucerian method, a mountainous dust-heap of pedantry and dullness, and yet, not less, a fountain of perpetual joy. Between the tragic lines of this "mery tale" I seem to read Chaucer's analysis of himself and his relation to his age: a poet (so he seems to say) who, employing the very conventions he condemns as the channels of his satire, is the unsparing castigator of everything artificial and narrowly mediaeval. Nor, as has just been hinted, is this enthralling drama of the "noble wyf Prudence" less profound as a self-revelation of its author's artistic method. Master as he is of the humor of expression, the *Melibeus* bids us remember that he is a still greater master of the humor of construction. We have all laughed at Chaucer's poetry; the *Melibeus* bids us beware lest we fail to laugh at Chaucer's poems. Who will be bold enough to assert, then, that the very treatise on the Astrolobe may not turn out to be the most pathetic piece of writing in the language?—or the most morally profound, or the most sublimely facetious, or all of these combined? There are infinite things as yet undiscovered in Chaucer. In final warrant of which faith let us hear again those words of Pandarus that describe with such perfect felicity what Chaucer has himself done in the poem we have been discussing in this essay:

How-so it be that som men hem deylte  
With subtil art hir tales for to endyte,  
Yet for al that, in hir entencioun,  
Hir tale is al for som conclusioun,

and, last of all, let us exclaim: O Chaucer dere,  
y-blessed be thy name,

That so can turnen earnest in-to game!

Mayst thou have thy reward in thy heavenly home and be vouchsafed the infinite joy—of reading the commentators on thy *Legend of Good Women*!

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